

## **Matthew 22:34-46**

22:34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,

22:35 and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him.

22:36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

22:37 He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'

22:38 This is the greatest and first commandment.

22:39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

22:40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

22:41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question:

22:42 "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David."

22:43 He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

22:44 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet?"

22:45 "If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"

22:46 No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

### **Sermon: Thriving with God and Neighbor**

This morning, Jesus gives us the answer we expect. We already know it. So do the Sadducees, and the Pharisees, and anyone else with a pulse.

Love God and love neighbor.

And while this may be the most straightforward response Jesus offers in Matthew's gospel, it's also the most provocative. Because love is the most powerful force we can experience.

Love drives us. We don't drive love. Singer Robert Earl Keen used to compare love to a rodeo; it's kind of like going down the highway at about 60 MPH and just chunking the steering wheel out the window.

If you are in love, there's no sense trying to write that term paper, because every 45 seconds you are going to look and see if she's texted back. Every one of her responses is worth a half-a-letter grade deduction!

Snuggle your infant in the crook of your arms, once, just once, and try believing there's not anything you wouldn't do to protect them, to help them find fulfillment and purpose.

Consider the bigger, broader things you feel called to serve: education, the environment, medicine, the law, world peace. Think about that

end. What obstacles, from mild irritation to trauma would you endure, simply for the opportunity to ignite a spark, preserve a sacred land, or foster reconciliation?

The Apostle Paul writes that love is patient, kind, never envious, always bold. But love is also not rational, at least in a worldly sense. Love allows us to think with our hearts, feel with our souls, and explore the deepest depths of our minds. Love allows us to consider the needs, feelings, wants, desires of another before we put guardrails and constraints on our ability to offer those things. Love is never budgeted, or cautious, or complacent.

And yes, it's true, love is risky. Because we put ourselves out there, not knowing how our love will be received. Unless, of course, it IS received. And, WOW, to be received with love – romantic, familial, spiritual, divine – to have partner, neighbor, village, or best of all, Creator, call us beloved, is to ooze every possibility of God's goodness.

Love is a choice, both as noun and verb. Love is something we choose to do and offer every moment of every day. We make an intentional decision to be in a certain kind of relationship with God and neighbor in everything we do. It takes work. It takes muscle memory. It takes doing the tedious, and the ordinary, and the extraordinary, and anything else that comes our way.

It also takes humility to receive love. To validate and appreciate the various forms of affection that come our way. To see what others offer us a gift, and to let that love inform us, shape us, and steady us.

Jesus tells us the truth, and the truth is provocative for the Sadducees, because as straight-forward as it is, it's still too hard for them to do. It's not about *can't*; it's about *won't*.

When we infuse love into Torah, it's not about being right and clinical, it's about being righteous. It's not simply admiring God, or describing God, or regurgitating memorized verses; it's about serving God, caring for God, seeing God in creation. It's not about tolerating neighbors, or simply not harming them, or living in isolation; it's about loving them. It's not about protecting structures or ensuring precise routines; it's about reorienting our hearts to experiencing the movement of Spirit.

The Sadducees want to live in a bubble with a watered-down sense of righteousness. They want God to be tame; the Spirit to be something managed. They do not yet grasp that it's God's Spirit that moves them. And they do not yet realize that love isn't something you can fake.

But it doesn't really matter what the Sadducees think or believe. It's not constructive to vilify groups of people from two millennia ago for struggling with the very same concepts we struggle with ourselves.

Jesus' response is directed to the Sadducees, but it could easily be directed to each of us in this room.

***Millbrook Baptist Church shares God's love by: Being an open and inclusive community of faith; Developing Christian disciples through spiritual growth; Serving the world through mission and ministry.*** That's on our website. It's our fancy way of saying that we seek to love God and neighbor.

But how are we loving, Millbrook? Is our love relentless, and at times even reckless? Do we chunk the steering wheel out the window, or get all giddy when our sweetie sends us a text? Would we risk our safety, our comfort, our solid footing for one chance to create an expression of love for God and neighbor that could fulfill us in ways we'd never imagined?

Or are we like those Sadducees? Are we waiting for God to affirm our inclusivity without actually pushing us to stretch our diversity of thought, or life experience, or background? Is our love limited to our pro forma statement? Must our love fall only within our bylaws? Can we love a God and the neighbors created by God beyond the shallow definitions we've given to each?

Does the Holy Spirit have access to our Google Calendars so They can schedule the most convenient time for us to be moved? (Hint: it needs to be a time outside of the Sunday School Hour or Choir Practice.)

Love God with heart, with mind, with soul. Love neighbor as self. Everything hangs on this. And it takes hard work and intentionality to get there.

There's a second part of this passage that's rarely discussed. But perhaps it's helpful to the concept of thriving. Jesus quotes a psalm attributed to David, whereby the author ponders the coming of the Messiah, or the Christ, the one whom will bring God's possibilities to Israel. Jesus notes the humility of David, who says he will worship the One who comes after him; David will bow to his own descendant. David is humble enough to know that God just gets better over time. And he's humble enough to know that future generations will unveil even deeper and even more revelatory relationships with their Creator. David doesn't just know this, he also hopes for it, because he chooses to live in a world much bigger and much bolder than his own.

Consider this, Millbrook. David reigns over the Golden age of Israel. The balcony was always full, and so, too, were the coffers. And the whole world knew his name. And for a thousand years, a nation believed that thriving was getting back to that very same place. They, like all of us, were surprised to learn that Messiah, and an ideal

community, would emerge from the work of an itinerant prophet, from a forgotten tribe, in an insignificant land. Somehow, somehow the God-centeredness of one person's commitment to calling, and their shepherding of several dozen faithful followers, changed the entire trajectory of history. God bore the human experience, and all of us, are better for it.

We, as a congregation, have sought to live the love of the Great Commandment for 151 years. The expressions of that love in the form of our ministries, programs, and prophetic witness have looked different in every generation, and yet they have been tethered by a common thread: a desire to be faithful in our context. Rev. E.S. Elliott captured this sentiment best, when in 1923, while securing the funds to build our old meetinghouse, he reminded Millbrookers: "We will have to build a house to meet the congregation of the future, and not the present."

I need you to hear this, Millbrook, and faith it, too. Our dreaming about our future, our considering new possibilities, our imagining bigger, bolder, more pronounced ways to love God and neighbor at Millbrook are not an indictment of our present or past, nor a betrayal of tradition. Instead, they honor the Spirit of the saints who have preceded us and those who will follow. None of us here would ever dream that our children's understanding of the divine be limited only to what we know. Rather, we would hope their wisdom, love, and capacity would exceed our own. And so it is for the future of Millbrook. We hope, we pray, we faith for a Millbrook that's even Millbrookier than what we know now.

Finally, let me say that it's not lost on me that today is Reformation Sunday. Today, we acknowledge that our faith is a bold experiment, something we've been tinkering with, improving, growing for more than 500 years. You might say it is our path toward thriving.

Millbrook, I believe we are called to thrive. Not simply exist. Not stand still. But to thrive. Thriving means moving forward, adventurously, excitedly, boldly toward a love that takes us on the ride of our lives.

But, Millbrook, I don't just believe we are called to thrive. I also know we *can* thrive. And we *will* continue to thrive.

May God embolden us to work hard for love. And may love give us the strength to thrive.

May it be so, and may it be soon!