**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**Proper 25B**

**Ruth 1: 1-18**

**Psalm 146**

**Hebrews 9: 11-14**

**Mark 12: 28-34**

**Looking for Love**

“Why”, you might ask, in one’s wildest imagination, “Would someone put four gigantic letters up at the foot of the beautiful St. John’s Bridge?”

The letters spell out a word that is one of the most famous in the world in any language, most used, most abused, most bandied around for reasons far beyond its real meaning, and as thus is the least understood word in the world. If you ever get up into my neighborhood in St. Johns, you might have seen the letters, and seen the sign.

It first showed up in March of 2019, just about a year before the great pandemic had the entire world in its grip.

(What do you think the four letters spell?)

Yes. The letters spell out one word: “Love,” and the massive sign that holds the letters sits at the foot of the iconic landmark, the St. John’s Bridge with its gothic arches, its aged patina blending with the colors of the river and the trees from which it springs and into which it disappears. You can see the sign, which only adds to the sacramental ethos of the structure, as you begin to cross over the bridge from the St. John’s side. You just can’t miss the word, “Love.”

The man who created the sign, Romen Sorensen has his workshop near the sign, so he sees his work every day, and is able to remember the reason he designed and erected it in the first place. He says,

*“I didn’t do it to get a bunch of money or get notoriety. I just felt it needed to exist, very deeply. That was my calling.”*

He felt called to create something that he sensed was needed in Portland. He felt the city calling to him for a little more love in at a time when love was harder to find, harder to believe in, harder to trust.

*“It’s the opposite of all the negative energy we’ve had” Sorensen said. .”It’s promoting the idea of love, compassion and empathy. I just quietly set it there and now people have grown to love it and I’ve had this immense feedback of positivity,”*

After a storm blew away the “e” in his word, he wired the letters together so that all the letters would stay intact and they have, throughout all the harshness of last winter and the searing heat and humidity of summer. And today, you can find his artwork “Love” on stickers throughout Portland and beyond, via social media.

Sorensen made a very asute observation. He noted that if we were to count up all the times you hear the word “hate” in the news, it would far outnumber the times you hear the word, “love.”

And when you get too much of one thing, especially something negative, like the word hate, everything gets out of balance. Yes, balance. Hate, or the ability to hate has and will always exists, and sometimes for the right reason. Even Jesus would say he hated injustice, oppression, cruelty and neglect, even though he never spoke of it, regardless of his feelings. Yet, in the name of love, he forgave those who perpetrated any of these. We can think of Paul. We can think of us and all God’s wayward children, forgiven from the Cross.

Perhaps, in his way, Sorensen, is using his art to respond to the call for more balance in the face of anger and hate that we hear and face so much today, as did that which Jesus heard and faced 2,000 years ago.

Jesus preached love. Sorenson is doing the same in a different way, but with renewed determination to build a permanent sign, which will continue to be embraced as a light balancing the darkness that continues to swirl around us.

What about each of us? We may not be called to build a giant Love sign at the foot of a bridge, but we are called to preach love in a particular way, with the gifts we have been given in order to display that love to the world.

In his answer to the scribe who approached Jesus and asked him “Which commandment is the first of all?”, Jesus responded by quoting the Sh’ma, part of the Hebrew daily prayer which is written in the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, as we Christians call it.[[1]](#footnote-1) Long ago and up until today, just repeating the words of the Sh’ma helps to deepen the Jews’ faith and commitment to one God, one Lord.

Jesus answered, “The first commandment is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

It became a prayerful mantra for our ancient ancestors, and it remains for all Jews and all Christians today, even with its slight modifications. For instance, Jesus uses the word mind, rather than might, and adds the word “strength.” Interesting and subtle shifts for us to ponder.

Regardless of the shifts, Jesus is clear. We are called to love. To love God with all our heart, meaning to love for all the right reasons. For instance, one can fine fame through one’s humble response to God’s call, one’s humble but effective use of one’s gifts, such as Romen Sorensen. It is to become known due to one’s works. In another way of putting it, it is not to use one’s good or creative works in order to become famous. It is to become famous *because* of one’s works. Love of God is expressed in this way and God becomes more loved because of your expression of love. One could say, love of God is shown and expressed through kind, humble and honest interaction with all those God has created in God’s own image. You and me and everyone else.

If you are longing to be famous because of self-serving motivations, and accomplish this through doing good works, or doing great good has, in some way, “used” God by saying one’s good works are really for the service of God, even though one makes sure one’s name is on the new building, or at the top of the donor list, or is the recipient of the grand prize at the annual charitable dinner. Don’t be confused. This often happens, and prizes, recognitions and fame often come to great charitable acts or works or financial donations. But, love of God, is revealed when one wishes to remain anonymous, or is truly humbled by the recognition and questions oneself regarding one’s motivations. We can think of Mother Theresa and her work in India.

Mother Teresa, also known as St. Teresa of Calcutta, was Albanian, born in the Skopje (pr. **Skow-pee-a**) in the Kosovo Vilayet (pr. **Veeha –yet**) area of North Macedonia in 1910. She was a Catholic nun and missionary and her real name was Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu: (Pr: **An-yes Gohjeh Boyageeu**) She died in Calcutta, India in 1997. In her lifetime of charitable service she was awarded numerous special awards and recognitions for her work including the the Noble Peace Prize. If you read her biography, which many of you may already know, you will see what it means to love God with all your heart. She sought no fame, although she received it; no awards, even though she did not seek them, she changed nothing after receiving recognition from world leaders both secular and religious, but just kept on responding to her call. And even in those times when, tired and feeling hopeless, she began to doubt herself and her faith, she was honest enough to let the world know of it, and through her faithful honesty was able to find her way back to her purpose in the name of love. What is it we are seeking, when we say we love God with all our heart?

To love God with all one’s soul is to be ready to sacrifice, even unto death, for one’s faith and trust in God. Throughout history, we have examples of Jewish and Christian martyrs who died rather than to betray God. We have historical accounts of Jewish martyrs reciting the Sh’ma as they endured torture and were led to death for their faith. We are very familiar with Christian martyrs who faced savage animals in Roman arenas, or were burned at the stake, or put through all manner of torture and death, simply due to their absolute and unmovable love of God with all their soul, praying and singing hymns of praise as they died. What are we prepared to sacrifice by loving God with all our soul?

To love God with all one’s might, is in one sense from an ancient Hebrew perspective, to love God with all one’s wealth. In other words, to love God by generous giving to charitable and helpful causes for all God’s people. To cling to one’s money was, and still is, by the faithful of all the Abrahamic faith traditions, perceived as idolatry that is, to make one’s possessions or money as something to be protected and idolized above all else, even God. We can remember George Eliot’s classic story, *Silas Marner.*

Does loving God with all our might live at the foundation of our decisions to give our resources to the church or to any other charitable organization?

So how do we begin to love “with all” these approaches and meanings? One can say look here, I go to church regularly, or synagogue. I read the scriptures, I I serve in the church or synagogue, and I don’t expect that God thinks I’m doing that to show that I love God. I do all that just because I love God.

The problem is that, for all this, most of us have just come part way in the loving God department. Much of the time, we do these things with love “in” our hearts. But God’s commandment is to love God with “all” of your heart. Not only that, but with all your soul, and with all your mind, and as Jesus adds, with all your strength.

The commandment is simple and straightforward, but like the world ‘”love” itself, it is misleadingly complex and hard to really deeply and profoundly understand and embrace. We are all carrying a rather large sack on our backs, filled with thoughts, emotions, feelings, reactions, deeds and projections upon others. We picked the sack up in early life and find it can get to be far to heavy for us to keep on enjoying life as we should. Other people may see some of the contents of our sacks as good things, good deeds, but maybe, if we were honest, we would know we were fooling some of the people most of the time, or most of the people some of the time, or in some other workings of the equation.

Better to keep the truth of a lot of what we display in the world, tucked safely back there in the backpack, out of sight, lest our true selves be exposed. What we like to call our lesser strengths are safer back there, out of sight. And, at the end of the day, we lose sight completely of what is back there, and don’t’ like to remember that its back there at all.

Sometimes, when we sit with someone, a friend or relative who has suffered a great loss, or disappointment, or failure, or something that has shattered dreams and expectations, we realize how much they must have had to face the contents of everything they knew about themselves, which they thought were packed away and forgotten, and now, in the face of tragedy or grief, sorrow or regret, come face to face with the contents of the sack, spilled out across one’s awareness and one’s truth becomes evident.

It is in those moments, we each have a choice, for every one of us has come to that moment in one way or another. And, at that moment, we either accept the burdensome aspects of ourselves, or we reject them in fear of losing our place in society, losing face, or worse, being seen as less than we are.

It is in those moments, when one looks into the eyes of another, looks in to the heart, soul and mind of another, that the decision to accept or reject the opportunity to dump the contents of one’s backpack in the name of love, is made clear to us.

The question remains. How shall we do we love “with all.” Not just part. Not just for self-gain. But *“with all”* for God. “With *all* our heart, with *all* our soul and with *all* our mind. In what ways do we, could we exhibit by consciously, unconsciously, or subconsciously loving with *all* our heart, soul, mind and strength. We may never reach perfection in our quest to love “with all,” but we can aspire with each step we take forward in life.

Thinking of blind Bartimaeus, whom we thought about last week, how might you respond to your call to preach love by bringing all that you have at your disposal to act as your lamplight so that you may “see” at last, the meaning of the first commandment for the good of your neighbor, and all God’s people.

What is *your* priority? What is most important to *you*? What is *your* “first commandment?” Go deep, and ponder, take time, and think, this is not a surface question. Pray to God for guidance in your answer until you can truthfully say, “This is most important in my life and I would die for it.”

Think of the words we are called to know, the words of Jesus reciting his interpretation of the Sh’ma and put the commandment in this way as helpful guide.

I will love the Lord my God, out of the whole of my heart

I will love the Lord my God, out of the whole of my life.

I will love the Lord my God, out of the whole of my mind.

I will love the Lord my God, out of the whole of my strength.

And, as you think about these, ponder also, “What does the word “wholeness” mean to *you*?”

What will you being into the world that reveals the truth of your call to love God and neighbor/

Will it be a big sign that spells out LOVE? Or something else that is just as evident of your intent to love “*with all*.” A quiet action requiring no recognition in exchange? A kind word that triumphs over harmful words?

Where are the bright parts of your heart, mind and soul: your courage, your honesty, your humility, your dedication and your capacity for love, which can help to banish the dark places, the self-serving, controlling, need-to-know, need to be recognized, the pessimistic places being harbored in that backpack into which we dare not look.

Look we must. But perhaps not always for the dark places, but for the bright lights of our heart, soul and mind. We are looking for love, and even as we root around searching the places it is most likely to be found, sometimes we miss the most obvious signs of it, like a giant word, fashioned out of wood and steel, brazenly erected for the world to see that we might never realize existed, but does for all those who cross the St. John’s Bridge.

Amen

Written to the Glory of God

E.J. R. Culver+

October 31, 2021

1. Deuteronomy 11:13-21, Numbers 15:37-41 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)