Jesus said unto him, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind... And... Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

~ Matthew 22:37, 40

Love Times Two

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. David Jordan-Haas
Matthew 22:35-40

July 9, 2017
We thank you, good and faithful God – for breathing life into us, for walking with us. Thank You that You are here, right now to strengthen, to teach, encourage. May these next moments (in Your Word) now be for You a tangible sign of our desire to more fully know You, love You, follow You. In and through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Teacher. Amen.

Of the 9.3 million personalized license plates on American roads, about one in 10 are in Virginia! Virginia is number one among all states of drivers driving with vanity plates (USA Today, 11/11/07). I’ve found there are some clever ones, and ones not so clever. For the past three to four years, our younger daughter, MaryGrace, and I, when we’re out driving around and we see a good plate, we’ve been writing it down in a little note pad that we keep in the car. Just three for now, for you: LIVLFLUV and 2BNSUN and SELI-BR8.

Today’s GO-TO Verses are what are described as the “Double-Love Standard” (Love God & Love Neighbor). So this got me thinking. If Jesus had his own wheels what would his vanity plate be to describe His Double-Love command? GDNNAYBOR or LUV X 2.

This morning, Jesus is having a tense encounter with the Pharisees. We’ll see that of the 613 MITZVOT (or commandments) in the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), of the 613 Jesus lifts high only two: namely, one, the full-on adoration of God and, two, the total cherishing of human beings. Love God – Love Neighbor. As I like to call it, the “Love-Times-Two” Command (Dale Bruner’s Matthew Commentary, p.409).
From Matthew’s Gospel, 22:35-40: “One of the Pharisees, an expert in religious law, tried to trap Jesus with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?’ Jesus replied, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important; ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on [better Greek here means hangs on, depends upon] these two commandments.”

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’

The Shema, Deuteronomy 6:5

Jesus has the audacity to elevate two commandments above all the rest of the law. Think of it this way: What if, one day, (it’s summertime, after all) you walked into the ice cream store of 31 Flavors and you were told that today there were only three flavors available? Wouldn’t you be a bit annoyed with Mr./Mrs. Baskins-Robbins? I mean, “You’re telling me I only have three choices – peach, vanilla or banana-nut fudge? Where are the other 28 flavors? Listen, I came in for a single scoop of Rocky Road on a sugar cone!”

So what if one day the Pharisees walked into the synagogue and they were told by a 30-something, backcountry carpenter-turned-rabbi that there are only two (of the 613) commandments that really matter; that there are only two to choose from and live by? How would that go for the Pharisees, do you think?
What really gets to the Pharisees is that Jesus *fuses* these two commands together; Jesus “solders” together these two *priceless* commands, like precious metal to precious metal. Love God – Love Neighbor, together. The phrase “just like it” means the second command is equal to the first. Namely, we *face* God with a big love (all heart, soul, mind) and just like it, we *imitate* God by cherishing others! Love-Times-Two.

Love God—for the most orthodox Jew, it is **THE** paramount commandment. It’s called the SHHEMA, from Deuteronomy, the fifth of five books of the Torah. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (6:5). Every worship service begins with the Shema. Every Jewish child memorizes and recites it. All devout Jews pray this command every morning and every evening of their lives.

And the second command, just like it, Love Neighbor, comes from Leviticus, the third book of the Torah. For the Jews, Leviticus provides the most detailed instructions about our “neighbor” – how to treat them, how to live with them, how to love them. Here’s the literal Hebrew translation for these “Love Your Neighbor” verses in Leviticus. Great instruction for us: *You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall gently correct your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not bear a grudge against any person, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord* (Leviticus 19:17-18).
These two loves intertwine: Love God – Love Neighbor; and it all starts because God loved us first. Because of our sin God needed to go first. God went first in love by sending us, by giving us His Son to demonstrate just how over-the-top God loves each one of us. As Kristen Holmberg puts it, “God’s ‘go-first/went-first’ love ought to then compel us to love one another in response to that love” (Our Daily Bread, 7/7/17). In his first letter, John writes “We love because God first loved us;” and the very next verse, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother (sister), he is a liar. For anyone who does not love her (sister) brother … cannot love God.” (1 John 4:19-20)

It’s important to get this “side-by-side” relationship of Loving God and Loving Neighbor. Loving our neighbor is a barometer, if you will, of how well we’re doing at loving God. Yes, absolutely, we show our big love for God by our worship and our fellowship; we show our big love for God when we’re praying and meditating on and memorizing God’s Word in daily concrete ways! And, yet, if we’re not doing a good job of actively loving others then we’re not doing a good job of loving God! Loving our neighbor is a barometer of how well we’re doing at loving God.

In 1985, the famine in the African nation of Ethiopia was the top news story. Eight million people were victims of that famine (along with a bloody civil war); one million people died; 400,000 of them, alone, died in northern Ethiopia. In September of that year, Steve Reynolds, the Communications Officer for the Christian relief organization World Vision, got a phone call from a European couple –
Ali and Paul Hewson. The Hewsons called Reynolds asking if they could come and see firsthand what was really happening there. Steve Reynolds doubted, though. Having taken countless other calls and requests that year to “visit” Ethiopia, Steve Reynolds doubted whether this couple could last even a couple days once they laid eyes on the grim reality and the scope of human suffering.

To Steve Reynolds’s surprise, the Hewsons rolled up their sleeves and stayed a month. They gave encouragement to World Vision workers; they unloaded food relief trucks; they accompanied doctors and nurses to villages. Paul was a musician, so he entertained the children by writing little songs to sing. Tirelessly, this couple loved-times-two, God and Neighbor. You and I might know Paul better by his nickname, Bono, the lead singer for the Irish rock band U2 (Rich Stearns’ *Unfinished*, p.151-152).

Since that 1985 trip to Ethiopia, Bono has used his immense influence and resources for the poorest of the poor. He championed Jubilee 2000, the debt-relief campaign for the neglected nations of the world. He’s the cofounder of ONE, the global advocacy organization established to end extreme poverty on the African continent. Bono and Ali are constantly traveling the globe as crusaders of justice and advocates for the poor. Loving our neighbor is a barometer of how well we’re doing at loving God.

But how now to bring this down to us. How can you and I use our influence and resources in our community, our town, our neighborhoods, right here? You’ve heard about our Ignite Outreach Initiative; we’re calling it the Cedar Center
because this initiative is about investing spiritually, tangibly and relationally with our friends in the Vienna/Cedar/Cunningham Park community. Phil Covell, our Project Manager for this effort, is like our Steve Reynolds; straight-up, he’d love to take your requests to go with him and see how we can Love-Times-Two, just 1.3 miles from our parking lot.

To bring it down even closer. Today, as we pray and seek to Love-Times-Two, here’s the question to ask yourself: “How can I really be loving God if …..?” How can I really be loving God if I’m still holding that grudge against that person at work who is hard to deal with? Or, how can I really be loving God if I’m feeling like giving up on that child or that aging parent in my life, who can be so frustrating? OR, how can I really be loving God if I’m so self-focused that I didn’t even know the couple next door to me just went through a divorce, just had major surgery, or is in a tough place? Or, how can I really be loving God if I can’t even extend grace to that slow person in the checkout line, or to that driver in front of me (with that not-so-clever “vanity” plate)?

Friends, today the greatest commandment in the whole Bible is broken down into two commands: Love the God who (first) loves you, and love the person who meets you. Simply these two. We’re constantly being told by the world, by the church, by the tapes in our head that there are so many things we should do. But this is freeing! Today, Jesus asks us simply to attend to these two commands: to Love
God and Love Neighbor with *all* that we are and to see where they take us today, and then the next day, and the next (Bruner, p.417).

*Good God, THANK YOU that You went first in Loving us. Thank you that when we feel unworthy, unloveable, unable, You sent and You give us Jesus. By Your Spirit help us to stay simple and stay available to LOVE as Your Son Jesus loves, to Love YOU and to Love our Neighbors today, and tomorrow and the next day. AMEN.*