
I Wanna Know What Love Is

Matthew 22.34-46

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 23 2005 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

Imagine a word that everyone knew but no one ever explained. Imagine if that word named an experience that everyone was supposed to have but no one was directing where to get. Imagine if everyone assumed this word referred to something that was very good, and almost everyone in the world seemed to want more of it. Imagine if that word was taken to be the summit of human experience, the distillation of all the world's religions. And imagine if almost every popular song was about what it was like to find it, to express it, or to lose it. We have such a word. And the word is love.

I appreciate many of you weren't born in 1984, but I'm sure the rest of you can remember the song from Foreigner called 'I want to know what love is'. I think one reason why the song aches on such a gut level is because it's the cry of someone who feels they've been left out of a conversation in which everyone else just seems to take love for granted. 'I wanna know what love is. I want you to show me. I wanna *feel* what love is. I know you can show me.' (And then there's a few wherrrs and ahhs.)

I'm not going to take for granted that you know what love is. I'm not going to take for granted that I know what love is. I want to leave love out of this question of the Greatest Commandment for a few moments and see if the rest of what Jesus says might give us the equipment we need to discover what love is. Let's look together at Jesus' words in Matthew 22. 37-9. I'm going to take the words one at a time.

Let's start with 'the Lord'. The 'Lord' means Yahweh, the God of Israel. Not any god but the God who the Israelites discovered as the liberator God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt and then realized was the very God who had created them in the first place to be his friends forever. So the Lord means the 'making for friendship' and 'setting free from slavery' one.

And then don't miss the next word, probably the most important of the lot: 'your'. The whole gospel is in that word. The Lord is *your* God. The Lord is crazy about you, the Lord adores you, the Lord yearns for you even through the long lonely times when you couldn't care less and turn back to your burger, your ball game or your biology book. The Lord cares so much for you that in Jesus the Lord lays down his life for you. The Lord cherishes every creature he has made, but he cares for you as if you were the only creature he ever made. *You are my beloved child, my heart's desire, my precious pearl of great price.*

And the third word is God. The Lord your *God*. This Lord, the making for friendship and setting free from slavery one, your Lord, the one who adores you and is as dotty about you as any grandparent could be for their precious Duke student who always used to run to them when their oh-so-loving parents were just too overbearing, just too embarrassing, or just too boring, your Lord, is the God of the whole universe. The one who scattered the stars in their heavens is the one who made the universe as a stage for friendship with you and gave his life to take away everything that might possibly come between you. Your Lord is the God of everything.

And what does this God who has given you everything want in return? You guessed it. Everything. The word here is 'all'. God has given you everything – life, breath, the whole of creation as your playground and the whole of humankind to share it with, and most of all, his own very life in the person of Jesus. What he wants from you is everything. And his promise is that everything you might lose from giving all away you will in fact receive back infinitely by receiving all of God, far more than everything. So give all to God, and receive back all of God.

What does giving everything mean? First of all, says Jesus, it means your 'heart'. In other words, the very center of your being, the vessel that makes every other organ function, that pumps blood to every distant part of your body. Your heart is your passion, your sheer physical humanity, your visceral sense of need and desire and drive

and power. Your heart is what you thump when you're getting ready for the contest, what you put your hand on when you're sincere, what you feel throbbing when something matters to you and you fear you might lose it.

Then second there's your 'soul'. Here 'soul' means breath, means sheer existence. Give God your pumping heart, yes, but give God also your whole soul, the whole meaning of your existence, the whole mystery of your precarious conception and inevitable mortality, your whole location at this apparently arbitrary moment on this tiny planet at one dull corner of a pretty ordinary galaxy. Give God the wonder and the anomaly of your existence, its glory and its contingency.

And third, give God all your 'mind'. You have been given your mind for one thing more than anything else: to wonder. Come to university, be astonished at the extent of the universe, be dazzled at the detail of the content of one tiny string of DNA, be daunted by the complexity of all the world languages, let alone the diversity of their literature, be delighted at the variety of coastline and cloud and coral reef and become devoted to documenting the ingenuity of agriculture in fourth-century Denmark: but let that wonder simply be a training for your wonder at the God who forgives seventy times seven times, makes beautiful even the most dastardly crime, and transforms the brokenhearted into heralds of his coming reign.

Why do you spend so long in the fitness gym? So your heart and body will be fit to receive all the tasks God will give them. Why do you carefully protect your life from illness and accident? So you will live to perform all the service God has in store for you. Why do you avoid the kinds of substances that bend your mind and alter your consciousness? So your mind will be fit and trained to take in all the wonder that God has prepared for you.

And the second, equal commandment? Well it's about the 'neighbor', and it's about the 'self'. Maybe it's easier to start with the self. Remember this body – with its heart and its passions, with its breath and its precarious existence, with its mind and its constant searching and enquiring and wondering – this body is a gift from God, given so that it might glorify God and enjoy him forever. Cherish this body, cherish its heart and soul and mind, praise God every moment for how fearfully and wonderfully it is made. This body is the 'you' that we celebrated when we realized that the Lord God was 'your' God. Cherish this body because it is you that God celebrates and delights in.

And then discover, gently, that that love that God has for you he has for the person sitting in front of you and behind you as well; that the way God is crazy about you and longs to cuddle you and rub your cheeks until you gurgle and giggle with joy – God feels that way about the person ahead of you and behind you at the Stop sign, in the social security office, at the ball game, at the supermarket checkout. And you give your whole heart and soul and mind to God by the way you treat their heart, their soul, their mind. If God so cherishes you, he makes your heart, your soul, your mind into a temple, and a temple in the Bible is a place where God encounters his people. Your heart and soul and mind are a temple, a place where God meets you. *But so is your neighbor.* Your neighbor is a temple too, a place where God will meet you. Think about your neighbor's heart – think about their physicality, their playfulness, their passion, their drive and desire. This may be a place where God will meet you: this person may be an icon to you of God's passion for you. Think about your neighbor's breath, their tenuous hold on life: think about their hunger, their sickness, their despair, their neediness: this too may become a temple where you meet God, the God who in Christ was needy and desperate himself. Think about your neighbor's mind, their ideas, their fears, their wonderings, their humor, their tenderness: this too may become a temple for you: their ideas may change yours for the better, their humor may strip you of your self-importance, their contrariness may dismantle your sentimentality.

So Jesus is asked a simple question, and he gives what sounds like a simple answer. But when you realize that every single word of Jesus' answer is laden with the whole story of God's longing for us and with his deepest desire that we respond to him, then you begin to discover how overwhelming this greatest commandment really is. This is the *Lord* – not some general faraway deity but the very real God of Israel made flesh in Jesus Christ. This is *your* Lord, who made you because he wanted one like you and set you free from a slavery that only you know. This Lord, your Lord, is *God*, the maker and restorer and sustainer of all things. And the Lord your God, who has given you everything, wants everything from you. He wants your whole heart, every fiber of

your being. He wants your whole soul, your very life itself. And he wants your whole mind, in all its independence and contrariness. He has given you your body as a temple in which you can meet him in heart and soul and mind. Cherish that body, because it is a place of encounter with God, and therefore holy. But he has also given you the gift of your neighbor, not the person you choose but the person that happens to wash up next to you, in the dormitory, the plane seat, or the library. And that person's heart and soul and mind is equally a gift to you, equally a temple where you may come face to face with God. And just to demonstrate that you are cherishing the precious gifts God is giving you because he is crazy about you, then listen to your neighbor's heart, nourish your neighbor's soul, and drink from your neighbor's mind as eagerly as if you really believed your neighbor was a temple given to you by God as a place to worship him.

This is the greatest commandment. It is the everything that we want from God and the everything he wants for us. Get this right, and we don't need to worry all that much about the rest. Oh, and by the way, I almost forgot to say: this is what love is.