The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
October 25, 2026
St. Michael's Church
The Rev. Joshua Wong
Gospel reading: Matthew 22:34-46

Let us pray: Lord, we ask you this day to open our hearts, our souls, and our minds to experience your deep unchanging love. By so doing, we may know how to love our neighbors as ourselves. *Amen.*

If you are a game show enthusiast like myself, you may enjoy programs like "Jeopardy" and "Who Wants to be a Millionaire." Both of these shows pride themselves on asking challenging questions designed to stump their contestants. As we heard in today's Gospel reading, when we decide to play "stump-the-Jesus game," be prepared to lose.

We witnessed this last week when Dan preached on the first half of Matthew 22. The Pharisees tested Jesus by asking him, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Jesus said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and

to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away." Round one: Jesus is in the lead.

Now, in the second half of this chapter, the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, and in response they took turns testing Jesus with more challenging questions to trap him. This time, they even brought along a lawyer, who asked him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" In their minds, they were thinking that Jesus would quote something from the Ten Commandments. But again, they were surprised with our Lord's response. Jesus instead quotes from the Great Commandment recorded in the book of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Two for Two, Jesus wins.

Here is a crucial moment for us to pause and reflect on what Jesus just said, why? Because it is the core message of the Bible. Remember the context of this story. Jesus's crucifixion is just days away. Death is literally staring him in his eyes, and he is rapidly running out of opportunities to communicate the heart of his message.

But when he is asked what matters most in a life of faith, Jesus doesn't say, "Maintain personal and doctrinal purity," or, "Worship like this or attend a church like that." He doesn't even say, "Read your Bible," or "Pray every day," or "Preach the Gospel to every living creature." Instead, Jesus uses this last opportunity to tell them **and us** the central message of God. "Love." That's it. All of Christianity distilled down to its essence. Love God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.

It sounds simple, but it takes a lifetime to accomplish. This is the message of God. If we Love, we change, and the world changes.

When we think about it, isn't love the main message behind everything God does? The creation of the world was formed out of love; the incarnation was for the reason of love; the Great Commission message before his ascension sends us out to spread the message of love; and God didn't leave us alone until his second coming, instead he provide us with a guide and a helper, called the Holy Spirit. Everything God does and provides are centered around love.

So, how do we love God and our neighbors?

We first need to understand the difference between our definition of love and God's definition of love.

As humans, we "love" many things. We "love" our favorite celebrities, our sports teams, television shows and our favorite foods like bacon and chocolate. We fall in **and** out of love. We say that love is blind, we believe in love at first sight, or that love can break our hearts. We tend to think of love as a spontaneous and free-flowing feeling where we have little control over it.

But this is **not** God's definition of love. Jesus doesn't say, "I sure hope love happens to you." Instead He says, "Love is the greatest and first commandment." Meaning, it's not a matter of personal affinity, or a lucky accident. Christian Agape love is characterized by unconditional care, sacrificial service, and a deliberate choice of the will rather than a passing emotion. It's a matter of obedience to a commandment to the one we call "Lord. God's love has the power to change our lives and can change the projectory of the world. Where there is hate, God brings love. Where there is pain, God's love brings healing.

When we understand how human love and agape love differs, it's **not** hard to understand why we find the Great Commandment difficult at times to obey. God's version of love requires us to cultivate our hearts by preparing and pruning away

things that get in the way—often times, our ego and our habits. The Apostle Paul speaks about this difference as the "old self and the new self."

If love is the essence of Jesus' message, then what would it cost us to take Jesus's definition of love seriously?

I don't think it's a coincidence that Jesus intertwined love of God with love of neighbor. Each reinforces, reinterprets, and revives the other. As children of God, we cannot love God while we refuse to love what God loves. We cannot love God in a disembodied way that doesn't include the pains of this world. When we are connected to the powerful flow of God's compassion, we can't help but spread that love to others. When we are connected to him daily, the Holy Spirit shows us how to love God and others.

One way to be connected with God is through a dedicated time spent with God each day. Teresa of Avila, mystic and monastic reformer, born in 1582, speaks about learning how to pray mentally, opposed to reciting vocal prayers of the liturgy. Many people in the Episcopal Church are accustomed to liturgical prayer, and there is nothing wrong with that. But we don't always have written prayers in front of us during the day. Teresa of Avila states that "mental prayer" is nothing more than an intimate sharing between friends. It means letting go of having the

"perfect words," but instead speaking to God about anything, and everywhere. Imagine having a conversation with your friend, it's not scripted, but spoken from our intelligence. Jesus and his disciples prayed often, without liturgy, but offered plain words to God. Or, consider a new spiritual practice of writing your own prayers down. Whatever method you prefer, prayer and meditation in God's word, such as Forward Day by Day, or other resources, allows us discover how to love God and others.

Lutheran minister Clayton Schmit once wrote: "To love God with all our heart, mind, and soul seems nearly impossible when we think of love as an emotion. Loving our neighbor is difficult. If love is merely our passive response to the person next to us, we are likely to be more often repulsed than moved to love. How can one legitimately look into the face of an enemy and feel unqualified love? It is nearly impossible. But biblical love is not passive. It is not something that occurs to us without our control or will. Biblical love is something we do."

So are we called to do?

I believe we are called to practice the Great Commandment in our everyday lives. We practice this when we have grandparent duties, as parents making choices for our children, and as patient care givers. We practice love when we interact with

people at the market, at the doctor's office, or with our colleagues at work. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who declared love for God and our neighbor is the be-all and end-all. Why does God say that this is the most important law? Because the world needs it. Everyday, we are tempted to sway from God by powerful misinformation. Everyday, the world values selfish ambition over mercy, to defend for ourselves, because the weak will not inherit the earth. But, the Great Commandment goes against society's teachings. We are to follow Christ's example by weeping with those who weep, to share laughter with those who need joy. To share with the homeless, or hold the hand of someone who is sick. To teach God's love to children, support those trapped in addictions, and to forgive one another. In other words, love guides each other home.

We will soon have an important opportunity to practice the way of love. We are days from our midterm election. If you have already voted, great. But if you haven't, please vote, and we all need to seriously pray for God's mercy during this election. We now live during the greatest political divide in America. The Church is not here to tell you who to vote for, but to remind you to always live by The Great Commandment. How is loving God and our neighbor reflected in your choices for school board representatives, judges, civic leaders, and whether we vote Yes or No to a Proposition? Who benefits from our votes, have we forgotten the weak, the voiceless and the forgotten?

Why did Jesus answer the lawyer with The Great Commandment? Because by obeying that, we will change, and the world will change. *Amen.*