

Community Church of Issaquah

August 25, 2024

Love God First, Then Others

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Does your mind ever spin away when you think about some of the things we hear in sermons or read in the Bible or have someone tell us something we cannot understand at all? There are things in the Bible that make my brain spin. Things like: when Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, why did it take them 40 years to make the journey that is a couple of hundred miles at most? And how did he part the waters so the Jews could escape, then let the floods kill the Egyptian soldiers who followed. And who carved the tablets of stone with the ten commandments? Was there someone else on the mountain with Moses? And where did the Israelites get the gold to make the idol they worshipped while Moises was gone? And where did they get water if they were in the desert for 40 years? Or food? Where did they get food for that many years? Every time I read passages in the Old Testament about Moses, particularly at the time of Passover, I can never find the answers to the long list of questions I have about it all.

But it's not just about Moses. Every time someone says, "I'll see you in heaven" I stop, and a flood of questions fill my head about that. Is heaven a physical place? Where is it located? Is it a place where the dead go and are reborn in the flesh? Would we recognize people when we were to

get there – like family, relative or friends who died some years ago. I never knew my maternal grandmother, so how would I recognize her if she is there – and if I am there? Is time divided into days and nights? Where do you live in heaven – houses? What would you eat there? Where does food and beverages come from? Is it somewhere in the skies way beyond our vision? Is Peter really at the entry gate checking people in? Are the streets really paved in gold? A million questions.

So, when Matthew tells us what Jesus said to the Pharisees about making sure we love God first, and with all our mind and heart and soul, I begin another journey into the world of questions. Where does God live? Is God just a spirit? If that's true, then why does the Bible say that we were created in His image. What is that image? Our doctrine tells us that God is a Spirit Who is everywhere. But his Son, Jesus Christ was a physical human being before he left this earth to rejoin His heavenly Father. So many questions are present for me as I strive to love God with my total being.

Yes, there are times when we all have felt the present of God in our lives – guiding us, rescuing us, saving us. So, there is no doubt that there is a God and that Jesus was clearly giving instructions about how we are to relate to Him. Like many followers of Christ, there are times when I struggle to fully love God as Jesus told us to do. I confess that there have been times in my own life, particularly my

life in the church when I feel as if God has stepped back from my journey and I can't sense his presence.

It's hard to wrap our heads around the commandment to love the unknown and the unseen. That's sure not like the real world, is it? With our usual relationships, we meet someone, we get to know them, we choose to like them – or not, and sometimes we learn to love them. How does that compare to our relationship with God? Jesus says if we are to love God with all we've got, it takes at least three areas of life that require some commitment and work. Be passionate – love God with all your heart; be prayerful – talk to God often, and more than that, listen to God; and finally, open your mind to really know not just who God is, but what God is doing. We must understand that to love God fully not only requires good thoughts, but time and work. Loving a God that you cannot see is a challenge, but that is what Jesus told us we should do – love God with every ounce of our heart, our soul and our mind.

Then the real-life portion of the message really hits home – love other people as much as we love ourselves. The question is, who does Jesus mean by others? Does he mean everyone except yourself? Does he mean just those in your circle of friends or family? Could he mean loving strangers that you never want to see or people you would never want in your life? Does Jesus mean even those people who do terrible things to others, or those we would consider our enemies? Who are the “others” that Jesus tells us to love as much as we love ourselves?

I've struggled with this question for years. First, even though it's hard to admit, there are times when I don't really love myself. It isn't always that I feel inferior or incapable, nor is it that I too often focus on my faults. It's that I feel as if I too often fail to do what Jesus would want me to do, and I forget that it isn't that part of my life that blocks me from loving myself. I must remind myself over and over that God loves me just as I am. I don't have to pretend to be a saint when I'm not. With all my inadequacies, God still pours out his love for me, so why can't I accept that and love myself. I don't have the answer to that today. I wish I did. But there are days when I do indeed love myself just for who I am, not because of any accomplishment I might have made.

When I move away from focusing on myself and rely on God's love for me, I understand better what Jesus meant by his message of loving others. For me, the others Jesus is talking about are those people whom God places in our lives. We all have families. They make up part of the world of "others." We all have friends. They also make up part of our world of others. And we all encounter a host of people we might meet as we move around in this world. They are a part of the "others," too.

Now let me add something to this message. I've shared this message with you several times before, but it bears repeating. Loving someone – meaning loving others – does not only mean having strong emotions or feelings for someone. Loving means you put those feelings into action.

That's not a difficult task if we're talking about family or friends. We would do most anything to help someone in our circle of relationships. And I do mean anything. But that's only part of the message of loving others. In your life you will encounter a host of "others" who come into your life, not by accident. I don't believe anyone comes into our lives by accident. I strongly believe that God places people in our lives to teach us how to be stronger and more faithful believers.

If you remember, years ago there was a strong movement in the Christian churches called 'WWJD' or 'WJD.' That was often the base for decisions regarding our life's challenges. That phrase was "What would Jesus Do?" I wish that had not faded into our past because we need that question more now than we have in our past. When someone who would be considered the 'other' Jesus tells us to love comes into our life, what would he do to love them? And let me be very clear here – asking the question "What would Jesus do?" does not rest only with us as individual believers, it rests on the shoulders of the church – this church.

Jesus has given us a strong message, just as he gave the Pharisees – love God with everything you have, our mind, our heart, our soul. And even more – love others like we love ourselves. You and I both know those are our call to obeying the teachings of Christ. Are they often hard to do? Certainly. Does Jesus or God love us less if we can't seem to master those tasks? Absolutely not. I believe that it is

the work of the church to put these words into action – loving each other, but even as meaningful as that, to seek to do what Jesus would do. What would Jesus do?

My hope and my mission as a pastor of this church or any church is to always have open doors and to always seek to do what my Lord would want us to do. Not every church has that as a mission. I read somewhere about the two kinds of churches today. In some churches, people are welcome if they will conform to that church's image of what a Christian looks like. And in other churches, everyone is welcome to fully embody the unique image God created them to be, to come just as they are.

The question I continue to ask myself is this: "How would Jesus do it?" Do you have an answer to that? Let's seek to answer that together as we journey on loving God and loving others.