

Pentecost +21 2020

Growing Up Into Love

Rev. Doug Floyd

Exodus 22:21-27, Psalm 1, 1 Thessalonians 2:1–8, Mathew 22:34-46

“For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”
(Romans 8:2, ESV)

Today our texts invite us to meditate upon the law or upon Torah. The Exodus passage offers specific instruction about treatment of the sojourner, the widow, the poor, and the neighbor. Psalm 1 is an exhortation to avoid the company of lawbreakers and soak in the way of truth. The Gospel rehearses the Great Commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. We hear and obey these commands not under the law of sin and death but through the law of the Spirit of life. We hear and we obey in light of the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

It is a good and wholesome thing to hear the Great Commandment each week in our worship. It is also good and wholesome to pause over these words from time to time and reflect upon them afresh, to heed them afresh, to seek to live in obedience to these words afresh.

The law or instruction of the Lord teaches us live in the reality of God’s abundant life. Just as a parent instructs her child, the Lord instructs his children in the way that they should go. Instruction is not divorced from daily life but happens within the context of life’s activities. A child learns to speak in the day to day interaction with father and mother. The child seeks to mimic the parents’ words and gradually grows up into the meaning of those words.

We ourselves grow up into the instruction of the Lord. We are growing from faith to faith, from glory to glory.

Instruction involves both hearing and acting. The teenager learning to change a flat tire learns by hearing and seeing, and then doing. As the teen attempts to change the tire, the father may clarify the instruction because once the teen tries changing the tire, he may realize that he didn’t fully understand the directions.

This helps us to understand Biblical instruction and the promise that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. Sometimes we do not realize that we do not fully understand the command until we start to obey the command. Over time we learn to embody the instruction as we hear and obey, get clarification and adjust. Over time, we gather wisdom about what obedience looks like within a given context.

For instance, there are times when obedience looks like gentle silence in the face of opposition. There are other times, we obedience looks like speaking and confronting in love. As we hear and obey, the Spirit of God is leading us into all truth.

In today’s Gospel, the lawyer who asks, “Which is the great commandment in the Law?” Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. He takes two aspects of the law that deal with love in relationship to God and then to neighbor and says that the Law and Prophets depend on these two commands. Following in the words of Jesus, the church recites these two commands every week as command of the Lord and reminder of how we fall short in obedience. We repent for not loving as we ought and ask for mercy to do so.

Our love for God and for neighbor is rooted in God's love for us. In the Old Testament, we read about the Hebrew slaves being rescued from Egypt by the hand of the Lord. This is the pattern. In His love, God acts on behalf of His enslaved people and raises them up as a royal priesthood. Their obedience is rooted in His love for them.

He says, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. " "You shall have no other gods before me." (Deuteronomy 5:6-7) He demonstrates His love first and then calls His people to respond. In Romans 5:8 we are told, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Without the action of God, we are blind to both His love and our desperate need for grace.

As Jesus addresses the Pharisees and the Sadducees, he is indicating that they are in fact blind to their own condition even as they are blind to His Father in Heaven. Outside of the love of God, we do not know God and we do not know ourselves. The ancient philosopher says, "Know thyself." Augustine responds, we must "know God" in order to "know ourselves." We are changing and changeable. Our loves are disordered. We do not know what we truly want or even what truly drives us.

We often pursue things and people and activities that bring about our detriment. We repeat behaviors that will only bring heartache. The command to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind is in some sense a command to grow up into the love of God. Only then can we love rightly. Only by God's grace do we realize our own need for mercy as well as His glorious purpose in making us holy unto Him.

We begin growing up into the first command by encountering the love of God in Christ. Consider St. Paul: a Pharisee of Pharisees; a Hebrew of Hebrews; zealous for the Lord and righteous according to the ritual commands. Yet, he was blind to God in Christ Jesus. As a result, He opposed and vigorously attacked the work of God. In His Damascus Road encounter with Jesus Christ, he beholds the Lord whom he is persecuting in the face of Jesus Christ. How is he persecuting Christ? By attacking His people and seeking to destroy His church.

This encounter opens Paul's spiritual eyes to his own condition. Instead of referring to himself as a Hebrews of Hebrews, he now refers to himself as chief of sinners. The Damascus Road encounter will also open Paul's eyes to the unfathomable love of God in Christ. He will go on to write that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. He has come to know the love of God that is beyond intellectual knowing. He has discovered that God's love for him cannot be measured in heights or depths.

This knowing is both an event and a lifelong process. Paul has encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus and is completely changed. At the same time, Paul spends the rest of His life pursuing Christ. In a similar way, we experience the love of God in Christ as an event and as a lifelong process. We hearing the Word of God in worship, in sermons, in personal reflection and even in conversation. The Lord reveals Himself to us even as He convicts us of our sin.

For some people, this is a dramatic moment like Paul's and for other people it is a gradual waking up to the reality of their desperate need for grace and God's abundant provision. However, it happens, God opens our eyes to His redeeming love in Jesus Christ and we respond by turning toward Him even as we turn away from our sin. This turning, this repentance, becomes a lifelong pattern of growing and following Christ. His Spirit convicts us of sin and righteousness even as He leads us into truth.

By His grace, we are learning to love God with our minds, our thoughts, our meditations, our reflections, our imaginations. We are learning to love God in our feelings, in our desires, in our longings. We are learning to love God in our actions and plans and purposes. The ancient Christian Celts would even say that we are learning to love God in our five senses: we are learning to worship and offer thanks by hearing, by seeing, by touching, by even tasting and smelling.

In this response to God's love, I am compelled me to love my neighbor as myself. Once Paul has encountered the unfathomable love of God in Christ, he quits persecuting the church and spends his life serving it. He offers himself as a living sacrifice to God as he pours out his life to the people of God. After meditating upon God's love toward us in the first half of Romans, Paul focuses on our love toward one another in the second half of Romans.

He writes, “⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.” (Romans 12:9-13) In Romans 13:8, Paul goes so far as to say, “for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

Each of Paul's letters to the churches, will offer practical images of what love looks like in that setting. This instruction is helpful for us all. It can teach us a way of acting in love even as we are learning and growing up in love.

For instance, we are called to love our enemies. At first, this might seem abstract. Who do we consider enemies? Terrorists? Other cultures? Other political parties? It might help us to think of difficult people, people who create obstacles to our goals, people who challenge us, irritate us, get on our nerves. Sometimes people with different personalities can run into conflict again and again. Instead of avoiding those people, we thank God for those people. They reveal our lack of love. They offer us a practical school where we seek to love those different than us.

One danger is that I consider myself superior to the other. I think my intellect or my spiritual insight or my life of obedience is superior to theirs, thus I have difficult treating them with respect. Thus Paul will write, “Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought.” Or again, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” I seek to honor them above myself. Wow! What a challenge that can be with some people. And yet, this is exactly how the school of love looks. I am learning the way of love.

Our first lesson today challenges us to consider how we love the most vulnerable among us. We should actively consider the widow, the poor, the sojourner, the neighbor in need. In each of those areas, I am quickly convicted by my lack. It is important give money, but it is also important to invest time and presence among those in need.

I might also consider how I love my peers, my siblings, my own family. I am told in the commandments, “Do not covet.” This can speak to possessions but also to titles and honors. Maybe a friend or an acquaintance receives an honor or even a job that I desired for myself. I should seek to be first in line to congratulate them and honor them.

It could be a valuable exercise of each of us to ask the Lord to provoke us to love our neighbor as ourself. We might take the 10 Commandments and ask how can I bear true witness instead of false witness? How can I properly honor my parents living or dead? How can give life instead of

taking life? I might ask, “Lord who can I love better? Whom am I overlooking? How can I reveal your love in the people around me as well as the people distant from me?”

Just as St. Paul poured his life as drink offering to God in His service of the church, we might also be a people who respond to the unthinkable goodness of God by learning how to love, when to speak, when to keep silent, and when to lay down our lives in service of those around us.