

August 19, 2018

Why Scripture?: All Hang on a Double Hook

Matthew 12:1-8, Matthew 22:34-40

By Rev. Jessica C. Gregory

I had forgotten how essential those glasses are. I hadn't seen a 3D movie in years, but both Ryan and I were excited to watch Disney's *UP* in the theatre, so that we could enjoy it in 3D. In the story, the elderly, grumpy widower, Carl, and a neighbor Boy Scout, Russell, are taken to the wilds of South Africa by a tremendous collection of balloons which lift them, up, up and away to a foreign land. The animators created incredible South African jungles and animals that Carl and Russell find during their adventures. The scenes are a delight to the eyes—if you wear your 3D glasses. I remember taking them off for a moment and looking at the screen to see nothing but a mishmash of colors. I could not make sense of the scene without those glasses. In order to see *UP*, those glasses were essential.

Today's Scripture passages tell us that, in order to live our lives as God intends, love is essential. All of the law and the prophets hang on a two-fold command to love God and to love your neighbor. Love is the lens through which we see the world clearly. Without it, we see only moving people and parts, not community and connection.

Love is essential. It is the lens through which we must interpret our lives, our worlds, and God's Word for us. This morning's scripture commands us to do this. It also demonstrates how that love informs how we understand God's laws—such as no work on the Sabbath.

A world without love is a world that is not livable. In her dystopian novel, *A Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood creates the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic state that has replaced the United States of America. In this state, love for any one or thing other than God has been outlawed. Love is seen as a frivolity of an earlier time; relationships bound by love are only a thing of the past – a past when both men and women had freedom, when knowledge was available to everyone, when women could read and write and study. It was a time in the past when love in one's life was taken for granted, understood as a given more than an essential. In the time of *A Handmaid's Tale*, it was taken away; women were separated from their families to become handmaids for elite couples who could not conceive, and rehearsed scripts were the only words that could transpire from one person to the other. In Gilead, a republic without love, relationships lost all depth. Love became nothing more than an anomaly of the past, and life became nothing more than empty time and obligatory actions. Without love, life is meaningless, for to live is to love.

Love is essential in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. As Michael preached last week, it is the center of God's identity, the reason humanity came into being. Jesus' two-fold command to love God and to love one another is the essential commandment of our faith. Love is essential in our life; love is essential in our Scripture. Living out scripture grounds our lives in love. But it is far from easy. The Bible is the most powerful book printed, and it has been used time and time again to hurt others; to tell people that God doesn't love them; to say that their lives don't matter. The people who use scripture in this way are, simply put, interpreting scripture incorrectly and in a way that is not faithful to the loving God who created it for us. To make it clear to the Presbyterian Church that such interpretation was not acceptable within it, in 1982 a

report was crafted, pulling from the church's confessions, to offer seven guidelines to ensure appropriate and positive interpretations of scripture (2009 Rogers 52,53).

The fifth guideline reads: "Let all interpretations be in accord with the rule of love, the two-fold commandment to love God and to love our neighbor." Whether or not an interpretation of scripture is correct can be determined by asking the question, "Does it result in love for God and neighbor?" The report explains: "No interpretation of scripture is correct that leads to or supports contempt for any individual or group of persons either within or outside of the church" (2009 Rogers 61). Following the rule of love in interpreting scripture is essential.

Jesus followed this rule. Even when it meant breaking a religious law. One Sunday afternoon when Jesus and the disciples were walking through grain fields, the disciples realized their stomachs were rumbling. They were really hungry and they needed to eat. How convenient that they were walking through grain fields! They easily plucked the heads of grain and ate as they walked. Also, among the grain fields were some Pharisees who immediately called the disciples out for their inappropriate behavior. "Look," they said to Jesus, "your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath" (Matthew 12:2). The Pharisees always had too much religion and not enough God. They forgot that the Torah, their holy book, was given by God in direct response to human need—specifically the human need to respond to life in ways that are life-giving. Nor did they realize that, in their eating, the disciples were doing just that—fulfilling a human need. Such behavior is what the sabbath was meant for! But the Pharisees didn't see it.

Jesus tries to explain this to them: "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:6-7). When God spoke through the prophet Hosea saying, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice," God taught that when religious observance is severed from merciful and fair treatment of others, the observance becomes a blasphemy against God (6:6). In their attempts to follow the law, the Pharisees became slaves to it, rather than followers of God. Scripture was created to serve humanity, to enable us to serve and love God and one another.

No scripture is more often stated when encouraging such service and love than ours for this morning. Jesus said, "'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 the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). This is Jesus' response to the Pharisee's open-ended and, they thought, impossible question, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" (Matthew 22:36). The Pharisees are trying to get Jesus to discredit the law and thus devalue himself as a rabbi. Jesus is not rattled. Instead, he uses the opportunity, as always, to teach about the law.

He responds to the Pharisees with confidence and authority, as he quotes to them the shema from Deuteronomy, the holiest of Jewish prayers. And then continues by quoting the much lesser known commandment from Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). The Pharisees ask which law (singular) is the greatest. Jesus responds with two, but one is like the other; they are equally important. All the law, all the prophets hang on one double hook. These laws together are the foundation of faith. In Jesus' description connecting the two laws he states, "A second is like it." These five little words turn the Pharisees' world upside down

because these five little words mean that God loves ‘the neighbor’ as much as the nation of Israel; God establishes a covenant with ‘all flesh,’ not just Jewish people.

These five little words mean that all that is revealed about God’s character in the Torah is founded on the revelation of God as the loving God whose covenant includes all the nations. Love is essential, but it is not always easy, and it is not always taught.

Jesus, the son of God, was also the son of Jewish parents, Jewish parents who taught him the Torah and who raised him within the house of Israel, a patriarchal house. In Chapter 15 of Matthew, Jesus tells us that he “was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel” (15:24). There were plenty of lost Israelites to receive Jesus’ ministry.

Perhaps because of this busyness, because of his upbringing as a Jew, because of the sexism he was taught, Jesus does not show love when an outsider, a Canaanite woman, approaches him, shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” Jesus ignores this woman. He then tells her he was only sent for the lost sheep of Israel. The woman persists, “Lord, help me.” Then, Jesus, Son of God, implies the woman is a dog: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” To which the woman defiantly responds: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (Matthew 15: 24-27).

It is this demonstration of faith that enables Jesus to see the woman not as an unclean outsider but a true believer, a beloved of God. It is this woman, this demonstration of faith, that teaches Jesus that, contrary to his experience of male dominated Jewish leadership, women have important things to say and need to be heard. Newly enlightened, Jesus does a 180 with the woman and responds, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you what you wish” (Matthew 15:28). Love is essential—then and now. The fact that our news cycles just last week included an African-American woman being called a dog makes this clear. The lesson of love never gets old. And its power is without parallel.

With creative genius, creator and star of the musical *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda, proclaimed this power with profound simplicity and power in his Tony Award acceptance speech. The awards took place on the evening of June 13, 2016, just hours after 50 lives were taken at the horrific shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Full of emotion and passion Miranda proclaimed:

*“When senseless acts of tragedy remind us
That nothing here is promised, not one day.
This show is proof that history remembers
We lived through times when hate and fear seemed stronger;
We rise and fall and light from dying embers, remembrances that hope and love last longer
And love is love cannot be killed or swept aside.”*

Love is essential and, as Christians, it is at our core. Our lives are created hanging from the double hook of love. We love God, and we love our neighbors as ourselves. All of our actions flow out of these commandments. It is how we see the world, and, without it, all is a mishmash. Why scripture? Because it gives us our double hook on which to hang our lives of love. It is essential. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Works Cited

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