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What Is the Highest Law?

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Matthew 22:34-40

This morning's gospel passage is set in the midst of a debate between Jewish leaders, the Sadducees and Pharisees. In first century Israel they were powerful competing elites connected to the Temple in Jerusalem. They often disagreed on the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Matthew presents us with a window into their debate as it draws in Jesus. They ask him about paying taxes to Rome, because *they* disagree on what they should do. They ask Jesus about resurrection because *they* disagree about life after death. They're at odds over interpretation of the law.

So when the lawyer asks Jesus a question it's not merely to trap him, as we Christians often read the text. It's more likely a local debate that in which they want Jesus' opinion. The lawyer genuinely wants Jesus to weigh in: does he support the Sadducees or the Pharisees?

The scene is not that different from what plays out among groups of Christians today. We debate the meaning of scripture, and *we want Jesus on our side.*

“Teacher,” the lawyer asks, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

It’s a good question. Among the 613 laws in the Hebrew Scriptures, he wants to know which is most important. It’s a bottom-line question, and we should listen carefully to the answer Jesus gives. He’s speaking not merely to that Pharisee or to others eager to hear his response. He’s speaking to us.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” Jesus says, reaching back to Deuteronomy. “This is the greatest and first commandment.”

But he doesn’t stop there.

“And a second is like it,” Jesus says, this time going back to Leviticus. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

But he’s not done. Jesus wants to clarify his response and aim it at the interpretation of *all* the ancient texts, so he throws in a bonus answer: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:38-40)

The fundamental rule of interpreting scripture, Jesus is explaining here, is *the law of love*. If the interpretation of a text points in the direction of God's love, if it amplifies God's desire that we love one another, if it shines light on the unconditional love of God, then we have understood the Bible in the way Jesus wants us to read it.

I wonder if the response of Jesus settles anything. Did the Sadducees and Pharisees walk away saying to one another, "We've been going about this all wrong. Our faith wants us to start not with *law*, not with the rules, not with the doctrine, not with the strict definition of what's right and wrong, but with *love*."

That's the takeaway from this text for us, as followers of Jesus. The starting point and the end point in our encounter with the world, with our neighbors, with those with whom we disagree, even with those we consider enemies, the starting point and the end point is always, always, *always, the love of God*.

To love in the way of Jesus we cannot keep putting ourselves at the center.

When Jesus says that all scripture "hangs" on the love of God and love of neighbor, *the image of a clothesline comes to mind* – a long line representing the love of God and the love of neighbor, stretching across all of scripture. Each biblical story, the psalms and the prophets, the formative narratives of the Hebrew people – we see them all hanging there, on that one line.

Then we notice that the line is longer, and stretches even further. We see the parables of Jesus, the healings, the cross and resurrection, hanging on that line of love. And the line keeps stretching. The letters to the first Christian communities are hanging there, and the words of the early councils of the church.

And that clothesline of love keeps stretching, through the spread of Christian faith around the world, through many generations of faithful followers. Nothing stops it. The line keeps going – the commandment to love God and to love neighbor, as we love ourselves – it keeps going right into the life of this congregation...and what is hanging there on that clothesline in our life together?

We see our worship every Sunday for more than 161 years. We see our welcome of Chinese newcomers in the 19th century, when they were scorned by others. We see the schools we started among immigrant children living on the flats along the river in the late 1800's. We see our ownership of Abbott Hospital and our role in offering medical care and training to thousands in the middle years of the 20th century, We see our support of mission in other lands that evolved into our global partnerships today.

It's all hanging on that long line of love stretching through our life.

We see the 16 churches Westminster has helped launch over the years, including Kwanzaa, now Liberty Church, the state's only African-American Presbyterian congregation. We see that partner church there, together with us on the long line of the love of Jesus.

We see our church calling and installing an Associate Pastor for Justice and Mission, Alanna Simone Tyler, nurtured by our partner congregation in north Minneapolis.

It's all there.

We see Westminster's willingness to work for marriage equality and to stand up for justice by advocating for an end to racism, for sensible gun safety, and for more affordable housing. We see Westminster using our new facility to welcome people coming in off the streets.

Our life as a Christian community hangs on *a clothesline of love* that stretches all the way back to Jesus and on into the future.

And we've learned that to love in the way of Jesus, *the other* must always be at the heart of our concern, *especially when the other is vulnerable*, always at the center of our concern.

"No one has greater love than this," Jesus says, than "to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13)

One hundred years ago today, at 11AM on November 11, 1918, the Armistice ending the Great War was signed. Inscribed on the bronze plaque in the Cloister Hall are the names of 191 men and women of this church who served in what was to have been *the war to make the world safe for democracy*. They were prepared to lay down their lives for others – and seven of them did.

During the war the women of the church formed the Westminster unit of the Red Cross. They ran one of the largest volunteer medical supply programs in the country, preparing bandages, garments, and other materials for our soldiers, orphans, and refugees. The women of Westminster produced and sent abroad more than 366,000 articles.

When troops came through town on their way to being deployed, Westminster families saw them in worship and invited them home to Sunday dinner after church. Westminster's pastor at the time, John Bushnell, whose own son's name is on that plaque as having served in the Navy during the war, describes hosting three soldiers at one such Sunday afternoon meal:

“The talk centered about their home lives and it was found that one was a Catholic, one a Methodist, and one a Mormon, all three feeling entirely at home with a Presbyterian minister's family. It was a local example of the leveling or elevating process of common great cause, eliminating all distinctions and creating the common denominator of an elemental human emergency.”

As we mark Veterans Day tomorrow we acknowledge that U.S. soldiers continue to fight in Afghanistan and other lands, without a sense of “elemental human emergency” and no perception of a “common great cause.” But, still, they serve on behalf of the nation and we must not forget them.

During World War I, as we bade farewell to those going to serve, prayers were lifted each Sunday. Large American flags draped the front of the organ, as well as a banner with stars representing every man from the church serving overseas. Flags of our allies were placed in front of the pulpit. A “Westminster War Letter” helped people keep track of our soldiers.

The congregation wept with the families of those whose sons were killed. The first to die was Edward Phinney, a deacon of the church. *To love in the way of Jesus* means to be willing to give up privilege and power – *even life itself* – so that others might live. Fred Wagner, a candidate for the ministry, was later killed in battle in France.

Nine-and-a-half million soldiers on all sides died in the Great War, the *war that was to end all wars*. Another 10 million civilians perished. More than 21 million were injured.

Westminster did not romanticize or glorify the war. Referring to the great loss of life, the Rev. Bushnell wrote, “It made us understand and hate war as never before.”

Following the Armistice of 1918, the Rev. Bushnell described war as “an affront to Deity, to (hu)mankind, and all the elements that constitute a moral universe.”

Speaking 20 years later, in 1938, as Europe was moving toward war again, he wrote, using words that may sound applicable to us in our time:

“There is at present far more fear harassing the human family, more despair of the (unity of humankind), more bitter strife and hatred between nations, more greed, more lust than before.” (All quotes and other information from John E. Bushnell, *The History of Westminster Presbyterian Church, 1907-1937* [Minneapolis, Lund Press; 1938], pp.21-31)

The response to the bitterness, hatred, and fear that enveloped the human family then *and the response to the bitterness, hatred, and fear that envelopes us now* is not more war and more weaponry and more violence, but, rather, that which Jesus says to the Pharisee long ago, when asked which was the highest of all the laws:

“The first and greatest commandment,” Jesus says,

“Is to love the Lord your God, with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and the second is like it, to love neighbor as yourself. On those two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

And, we might add, *the ministry of this congregation, and of Liberty church and other communities of faith and people of goodwill everywhere, and the life of this nation, and the future of humankind. The commandment to love. To love God and neighbor.*

As we hear the bell toll here in our sanctuary with others across the land marking the Armistice 100 years ago, as we remember and give thanks for those who served and those who died in the Great War, let us also redouble our commitment to strive for the

justice and peace that comes from those who follow the highest law: *to love God and love neighbor.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Charge to Westminster Presbyterian Church Congregation
on the occasion of the installation of
Alanna Simone Tyler

Westminster congregation:

I charge you to listen to one another and to listen to your neighbors. In Christian community we owe to each other an eagerness to listen. At times what you hear will make you deeply uncomfortable. Keep listening anyway. In our listening to each other we learn each other's hopes, hurts, and purpose. Remember, "listening can be a greater service than speaking." (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*)

I charge you to actively seek to be helpful. In Christian community we owe to each other a commitment to share in the small and large acts of helpfulness that position God's church to share its significant gifts with the world. With humility, actively seek to help where you are needed and you will find yourself fully sharing in God's mission.

I charge you to bear one another's burdens. In Christian community we owe to each other and our neighbors a willingness to live in such a way that we get close enough to bear witness. Jesus modeled this for us when he came and lived among, befriended and taught everyday people. Respond to the Spirit's stirring in you to become involved in the lives of others – including opposing injustice and fostering peace.

I charge you to open your hearts to Alanna Simone Tyler and to continue to pray for her as she discerns with you how Westminster will help to build a loving, sustainable and just community outside and inside the church. Be patient with her as she learns your name and your stories. Support and encourage her to keep holy practices and habits that renew her love, imagination, intelligence and energy.

Inspired by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writing about service in Christian community