

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Amateurs

Matthew 22:34-46

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After quizzes by religious and political leaders on all matters of law and life, an expert in the law steps up before Jesus. Someone who knows more about the law (than most people want to) takes his turn. A lawyer asks a question about the law.

This lawyer didn't come to quiz Jesus. He came to test him. This isn't a contest to see who can cite the most obscure legal matters. This is about the whole enchilada; he makes it clear: "What is the greatest law?" It's the kind of question that kept torah seminary students up at night bantering in the dorm and old men tossing in their beds on long sleepless nights: "What is the meaning of life? Why do we exist? Can God make a rock big enough he can't move it?" These kinds of questions torment us.

Jesus doesn't blink. He knows there is an answer. He knows the answer. Because he knows the character of God:

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."

This response of Jesus is not to be taken for granted, because, among the numerous precepts of the Hebrew Law, the most important were the 10 Commandments, communicated directly by God to Moses, as the conditions of the Covenant with the people. It's not hard to imagine an argument about Sabbath observance vs circumcision vs honoring father and mother as the great commandment that holds everything else together. But Jesus wants to make it understood that without love for God and for our neighbor, there is no true fidelity to the Covenant with the Lord. You may do many good things, and fulfill many precepts, but if you do not have love, this serves no purpose.

And so here we are presented with one of the foundational teachings of our faith. Its importance to us extends into every way of being and understanding what it is to be in the world as a Christian. And yet, we may be so familiar with this passage that it ceases to register with us. We may be too familiar with it. It is important then, to come to such a passage re-grounded in its power and its wisdom.

The passage is powerful because it centers the whole moral geography of God's law on love. And it does so precisely at a moment when love was absent. The lawyer's question didn't derive from love either for Jesus or for the law or for truth or for God. He and those with him were trying to get Jesus in trouble to get rid of him. It's only a matter of days now for Jesus before his arrest. And they were living at a time of great tension as subjects of Rome's empire. Everyone was. In other words, if loving God and others is a luxury for the comfortable and secure, it had no place at that moment. But giving love isn't for when all is going well; it's for when all is going terribly. It's for when you are hurt and when you're angry and when you feel betrayed and

when you feel afraid. That's the power of the claim on us of the law of love. It's not just for when you're full. It's for when you feel most empty.

Love is not like the top rung of a ladder or a peak of a mountain or the top of the pyramid hierarchy of needs but the center of circles, like ripples in a pond from where a stone was dropped in. Which is the greatest means which is the center from which everything else radiates out and to which everything else points. Jesus jumps right in with the answer from Deuteronomy 6, the Shema: *Hear o Israel, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with your whole self.*

This is powerful in that it means that every other law---and there were so very many--- then is to be understood and seen as serving the law of love. A whole moral code, a whole moral universe oriented toward love of God and others. This is the vision of God's people that God dreamed.

This is powerful, and it is wise because this is how we are made. Created in the image of God, who is a fountain fullness of love, we were created for this purpose. There are many good things that will define your life and your aspirations: freedom, independence, happiness, but what you were made for is love. To receive and to give. You were made to give and receive love, and at this, we are all amateurs.

The masterful preacher and wordsmith John Claypool opened a sermon by declaring God is an amateur. Claypool talked about how words change their meanings. An amateur in today's parlance means someone of limited competence; someone who does not do something with much skill and may even be something of a blunderer. I would add that at least in athletics, the idea of an amateur now is also a rube who is being taken advantage of for their name, image, and likeness. Amateur has a negative connotation and calling God an amateur sounds like an insult. But, Claypool reminds us, amateur comes from the Latin root *amare* which is the verb for love. In its original intent, an amateur was a person who did whatever he or she did for the love of it; that is their motivation came from within and not from without. An amateur was not paid to do something, nor coerced by external force. The reason for such a person's act was positive intentionality. Here were folks who did what they did for the sheer joy of it.¹

That's an amateur, and that's God, according to Genesis and according to Christmas. God is an amateur. From the opening page of Genesis through the final pages of the gospel, God does what God does for love and invites us to do the same. Love is the first, final, and greatest reason for anything.

Amateurs in the faith are those who love God and love neighbors as purely, hopefully, and widely as they are able. Those of us who traveled to Brownsville this week saw this kind of love lived out through the pastors and people of the church we served with. From the asylum seekers, we met we heard stories of helpers in Ecuador and Mexico City who gave hope and light in some extremely dangerous moments. In all the chaotic trauma of the mass migration of

¹ *God is an Amateur*, 10

this age and those who would take advantage of the most vulnerable in their midst, the light of love still breaks through the storm clouds from time to time. Thanks be to God.

I was reminded of this again last week when I took part in a funeral for the father of one of my childhood friends who was one of our youth group parent volunteers. Person after person remembered Big Mike's selfless service to others across a lifetime, often back in the kitchen baking potatoes for youth group Sunday night suppers, which we now repent for not being sufficiently grateful in those days. He was among those who embody the words from Thessalonians: *so deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our own selves because you have become very dear to us.*

The law of love is made known in individuals in crisis and individuals and communities in service are made known in the breaking of bread at communion and in the celebration of baptism. Immersion is the sign of our participation in the love of God into which we are invited and called. A love which takes the shape of lowering and raising, of descending and ascending, of death and resurrection.

No doubt we will participate in God's love incompletely and with many mistakes, more than we can count. Sometimes, it feels like a death to love others. Sometimes, it feels impossible to love God. But every day we rise and by God's grace, we try again. We can pray every day, "God I desire to love you today. I want to love you with my whole heart, mind, and strength. I want to love you. Help me love you and to see your face in the faces I meet today. Whatever the cost. I want to love you today. Help me be an amateur at life and love today. Help me do all I do just for the love of it, just for the love of God."

With a daily prayer such as this on our hearts and minds, we become open to God's redeeming work in our lives, taking us as we are, meeting us in just the place we are, and drawing us into deeper communion with God and all God's children. With this openness, the Spirit of God works in our lives, just as the Spirit hovers over the chaotic waters of Creation and as the Spirit moves in the waters of baptism, for which we now prepare and to which we now come.