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February 13, 2011 • the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany (A)

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

This is a week when many of our thoughts turn to love. Many give thanks for the loving relationships in their lives – others may mourn unfulfilled hopes.

Love is ultimately at the bottom of our readings today. The love discussed is the one that drove the original Saint Valentine to give generously to others in need. The love underpinning it all is not romantic love, or familial love. It's God's love for us and ours for God.



Several verses before our passage in the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy, the author described a summary of our love story with God:

“Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.” (*Deut. 30:6*)

God is the first actor in this love story. By God's grace, the people of Israel were claimed as God's own, through God's “circumcis[ion]” of their hearts. That new relationship founded in love inspires love from us humans, with all our hearts and with all our souls.

Often when we hear the Bible speak of commandments, that distracts us from the story of love which is our scripture. We tend to think that those two ideas – command and love – don’t fit together.

However, the commandments in our Old Testament were instruments of love. They were teaching the people what it means to “love” God. The Ten Commandments were the big guideposts, for the Israelites rescued from slavery. As time passed, more and more commandments were offered to guide the people in their lives of faith.



The words from our text today are attributed to Moses, supposedly his last words to the Israelites before his death. Our passage makes it clear that choosing whether to love God, or not to, had great consequences. It was ultimately a choice of life or death:

“If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.” (30:16)

God was not testing the Israelites. It was not a competition to see who was most worthy. The choice was offered by God in great love. And it’s clear from Moses that God desired for them to choose well. “Choose life so that you and your

descendants may live...” (30:19) They were free to choose, but God hoped they would choose the good, which came with fruitful, abundant life. God hoped they would choose the relationship of love. God hopes that we will, too.



I think Jesus also had the love of God in mind, when he spoke to the crowds in our gospel lesson. He does that throughout the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapters 5-7.

At the end of last week’s passage from Matthew, Jesus said:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (*Mt. 5:17*)

His teachings were to be understood in line with the scriptures cherished by Jews. He was explaining what it meant to live, loving God. He was clarifying for listeners what God’s hopes were for their lives.

Jesus began with the foundational guideposts, highlighting some of the Ten Commandments. “[I]t was said... ‘You shall not murder’” (5:21) But it’s not just about murder. Anger with one another is our failure to love God through our lives – it’s in fact our choice for death instead of true life. Jesus continued by teaching his listeners what they should do instead. When you or I have sinned against another, we are to seek them out, and be reconciled. Notice that it’s not about when we are ticked off by someone else. We’re to be so attentive to our effect upon our

neighbors, and on our relationships, that we would be able to seek reconciliation over our own failings.

“[I]t was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” (5:27) But it’s not just the actions associated with adultery, about which scripture is clear. It’s merely looking at our sisters and brothers as property, as things, subject to our whims and powers.

Jesus noted that the law allows for divorce. That doesn’t change the fact that marriage is for a lifetime. Vows should be made in seriousness. “You shall not swear falsely,” but be faithful to all vows that you make. (5:33)

Amid reflection on these specific laws, Jesus spoke in more general terms, about the habits that we all have. Every one of us has weaknesses and tendencies. They help us each fall into the same sins, again and again. They are stumbling blocks, that stand in the way of living our faith and our love of God.

Jesus taught that we should take these problems seriously. We should not give ourselves to thoughtless indulgence. If something about us, or in us, is causing us to stumble, then we need to tend to think about the big picture. I doubt that anyone heard his words and thought it would be a good idea to pluck out her eye. But his point was made. We need to take our habitual problems seriously, for the character of our love and our lives is at stake. Unlike his teaching on anger, Jesus does not

give a step by step explanation for what to do. We have the opportunity to confess to God and one another, and to seek healing of our weaknesses and sins.



We make many, many small decisions in our daily lives. I don't mean to overstate the situation. The character of our lives probably doesn't hang on whether we choose vanilla or chocolate. Yet there are lots of small decisions that matter a lot: about our relationships with family members, work colleagues, and friends; about how we handle our time and money and belongings; about whether we face or ignore our failings and sins; decisions about what we do in our grief and celebrations, our hopes and dreams.

With all of them, each choice has the potential to reflect our love for God, expressed in that moment. Taken altogether, our many choices create a picture. At their best, our lives reflect our love for God, and the life that flows from that love.

God speaks, with great love: "... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses." Amid every decision, both small and large, "Choose life..."

(Deut. 30:19) Amen.