



**From the pulpit of  
North Shore Congregational Church**

**“Hanging on to Love”**

**Rev. Julie Sheridan-Smith – Preaching  
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 Matthew 22:34-46  
November 5, 2017**

**Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18**

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup>Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

<sup>15</sup>You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. <sup>16</sup>You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. <sup>17</sup>You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. <sup>18</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

**Matthew 22:34-46**

<sup>34</sup>When the Pharisees heard that he [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup>and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” <sup>37</sup>He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’” <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

<sup>41</sup>Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: <sup>42</sup>“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” <sup>43</sup>He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, <sup>44</sup>‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? <sup>45</sup>If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” <sup>46</sup>No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

**Hanging on to Love**

Someone referred to this section in the Matthew's gospel, this reading, and a couple chapters before this, as a tennis match. We have, for several chapters, had the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Herodians lobbing questions and quizzes into Jesus' court, hoping to score points and trip him up. And Jesus lobbing questions and answers back, clarifying and deepening truth. And the match is played on in our reading this morning with one of the Pharisees lobbing the ball, or question, "which commandment...is the greatest." And it is a question that *everyone* knows the answer to...at least on "paper." So Jesus holds the ball before lobbing it back, with the answer that even those keepers of the law, those 614 commandments, know in their heads if not by heart...First love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and second love others, love yourself. For all that is written of the law and from the prophets is simply a commentary on love, *everything* hangs on love.

To borrow another tennis term, at the end of our reading Jesus set's up the "ace" with the conundrum of his final question about who do they think the Messiah is...they cannot even touch this question, with any kind of response without a deep re-orientation of faith and understanding. Because the answer to that question was standing there in front of them, issuing these two commandments as a promise and invitation to life.

Our first reading from Leviticus this morning makes that bold claim, that we will be holy because God is holy. Last Sunday we talked about how we are all created in God's image, and *all* are deeply loved by God. And now we are challenged to ask, *how* do we give everything over to God in that way...loving God with *all* our heart, soul and mind? We are better and better able to love God in that way when we love what God loves: loving others, loving ourselves.

Last weekend I imagine a lot of children went Trick or Treating. I know the weekend before we had so much fun with the many people who came to the Trunk or Treat event we did at church. At the end of that event, as we were cleaning up, I encountered some of the kids with their piles of candy, laid out on a table, categorized for trading, keeping and some to give away. I remember doing that as a child and later watching my own children coming home from trick or treat, spreading everything out on the floor, making bargains with each other before sweeping it all back into their individual bags and being sent off to bed. I know as the week went on, my children's bags of candy diminished at varied rates. One of them couldn't resist gobbling it up quickly while another one's stash lasted for months as he enjoyed hanging on to it, as he enjoyed having some to keep and some to consume. Now of course, Halloween candy is not really an analogy for God's love, Not At All! But...it may be a good one for how we live out that second commandment of Jesus- to love others as ourselves...sometimes we may pile our love into categories of the things we like best. Sometimes we trade out our love for something else that looks better. Sometimes we hoard it, wanting to keep some for ourselves because we don't want to be without...

We can find an abundant list of shall and shall nots in those writings of the law and the prophets that Jesus refers to. We get a taste of this in our reading from Leviticus. Jesus' answer is to let all things hang on love, and that is where what seems to be a two step plan from Jesus gets challenging as we try to lean further and further toward the image of God that we are created in, toward the example we have in the way of Jesus.

Can we truly love what God loves? Can we love *like* God?

I know and believe we want to, and I know at times we fail. We get distracted by oh so many things; news, schedules, games, jobs, or even the fear of boredom. And there are many times that we must choose and prioritize in terms of our time and resources. But love is not meant to be a limited resource. And loving *like* God is risky and costly. To love others, even ourselves in the way of Jesus comes with a risk and may come at the cost of something else. At the cost of giving away or setting aside other things that rule our life, like our sense of power, and privilege, or our desire for prestige. For if we love what God loves- others as ourselves, we realize, as Martin Luther King Jr. said,

“Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”

As I said, we *will* fail to love God with *all* our heart, soul, and mind...and thus we *will* fail to love others as ourselves. But here’s the Good News! God loves us unrelentingly and keeps asking us to love others that way. God forgives us and teaches us to forgive others and ourselves. And this is a way of love we can hang on to.

Once again, I offer to all of you, something someone else wrote. It is a quote from Thomas Merton that I keep on the bulletin board above my desk. It serves as a good reminder to approach each day knowing that God is more in all things, and I am grateful.

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

And because I know this to be true, I will keep hanging on to love, and I pray this for you as well.

Let us consider as we come to this table today, as we hear again to do this “In remembrance of Jesus” that we remember a love that we can hang on to, a love as mysterious as God and as close as our own flesh, a love that walked with and welcomed all, even those who opposed him. And that Jesus, with arms spread on the cross, offered the embrace of God’s love that will not let us go.

Amen