

Sharing Our Own Selves (I Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-40)

The Constitution of the United States started out with only seven articles and 21 sections that took up only four handwritten pages, including signatures. But today the US Code, which is all of the laws of this country, fills up around 80 volumes of books. We've gone from four pages to nearly 800,000 pages.

But we Americans aren't the only ones who took something simple and made it complicated. The ancient Jews did the same thing. God had given them 10 laws to follow. And yet, by Jesus' day, the Jews had turned the 10 Commandments into 613 separate laws. And the Pharisees knew and religiously tried to follow all 613 laws.

The Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees had all been trying to trick Jesus. They wanted to catch him with something they could use against him. They wanted to arrest him and be done with him. After all, Jesus was messing with the status quo. He was upsetting the social, economic, and political orderliness--the delicate balance--that existed for them.

So the Pharisees, knowing so well all 613 of the religious laws, decided that maybe they could get Jesus to slip up if they questioned him about the laws. He'd already boldly broken some of them. Would he side with some rabbis who said that some of the laws were more important than others? This would surely anger the rabbis who said that all 613 of the laws were of equal importance.

So a lawyer, asked Jesus, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus answered with part of the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:5, words recited daily by devout Jews, and combined it with a second commandment from Leviticus 19:18, which was actually a summary of Jesus' own ethics, how he had been living his own life. Specifically, 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 a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Friends, here's another example of what we find so often in the Bible and so often in our lives. The Pharisees were trying to trick Jesus, but Jesus used their evil for something good. He used their tricky question to help his followers throughout the ages know where to focus our lives. He made it clear that we

Christians are to build our lives around loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

But while Jesus' words are clear, interpreting and living those words is not so easy. So this morning, I'd like to share with you some of my thoughts on what love is.

First, the love Jesus talked about is to involve us completely and totally. "You shall love...with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." We aren't to just compartmentalize our lives...so that we love God on Sundays or we love others when we can find time to schedule helping them. Our love for God and for others is to be complete, perfect, to permeate every part of our being, every moment of our breathing and living. The Apostle Paul well expressed it in today's epistle. He described the way in which he and his companions had come to the Thessalonians. Paul wrote, "As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. 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" (Thessalonians 2:5-8). As Christians, it's not enough that we share the words of the gospel or a part of our time. We're to share our own selves.

Second, the total or complete love Jesus talked about wasn't just a warm, fuzzy feeling that we were to have for God and for our neighbors. We today live in a time when the word "love" is terribly misused. We associate the word with a feeling; however, biblically, the word denotes action. So, when Jesus used the word love, he was saying that we must be committed to God and to our neighbors to the point that we actively serve or help them. For example, six-year-old Brian's mother died of Hodgkin's disease. At the visitation, faced with the casket, Brian cried and cried, his whole body shaking with grief. His father and his aunt tried to console him, but he seemed unreachable. Nothing seemed to help Brian, until quietly, two of his friends, who had been in school with him since preschool, walked over and stood on either side of Brian. One of them put his hand on Brian's shoulder. Brian looked up and saw them, but kept crying, and the two friends just continued standing there with him. They didn't try to cheer him up. They didn't even talk to him. They just stood there, surrounding him with their love, while he cried. Slowly, Brian's crying tapered off, and then the three boys ran off to play. Every so often, though, Brian would come back and stare at

his mom's casket, and the two friends would stand with him again.¹ These two little boys knew how to love, didn't they? If we want to truly love, we need to look around for someone who's in pain and stand with them. We're to share our own selves, standing with them in their pain. Jesus came to stand with us in our pain, and he calls us to do the same.

Third, loving isn't to be limited to just the people who live next door to us, or who are like us, or those whom we like. When Jesus was asked "Who is my neighbor," he told the story of a Jew who was lovingly cared for by a Gentile, a man whom the good Jew probably wouldn't have stopped and helped, had the tables been reversed. One man of our times who obviously understood Jesus' point in the parable of "The Good Samaritan," a man who understood that loving isn't to be limited to certain people, was Louis Saunders. Saunders was a Disciples of Christ minister who served a church in Texas. When he died in 1998, however, Saunders was remembered in a long memorial in *The New York Times*, and this was because of something Saunders did to show love to someone no one else wanted anything to do with. Saunders was serving a church in Fort Worth when he heard that Lee Harvey Oswald was going to be buried in Fort Worth. Oswald had assassinated President Kennedy and then himself had been assassinated by Jack Ruby. Saunders knew that Oswald's mother was a Lutheran. So he took it upon himself to make some calls. Saunders arranged for two Lutheran pastors he knew to conduct Oswald's funeral service. On the day of the funeral, Saunders went to the cemetery to observe. But the Lutheran pastors had backed out. They said that they didn't want to be out in the open where they would be exposed to a sniper! The small, lost, poor, grieving Oswald family asked Saunders if he would officiate. So he did. Saunders recited the 23rd Psalm and a passage from The Gospel According to John. And he added, "Mrs. Oswald tells me that her son, Lee Harvey, was a good boy and that she loved him. And today, Lord, we commit his spirit to your divine care."² If we want to truly love, we need to reach out to help those no one else wants anything to do with. Jesus came to care for society's outcasts, and he calls us to do the same. He told us, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44). We're to share our own selves with all those in need, to stand with them, whether we agree with them and their behavior or not. Jesus came for the unrighteous as well as the righteous, right?

¹ Duncan, King, "Tasting The Gruel of Love"

² Ibid.

Fourth, loving involves forgiveness. We all know that at times, even those closest to us hurt us. If we weren't able to forgive, we'd never love. Many years ago, two young men with long records of crime and delinquency robbed the YMCA on the lower east side of New York City. On their way out, they saw a man at the telephone switchboard. Afraid that he would call the police, they grabbed him and savagely beat him with brass knuckles, leaving him for dead. For days, the man lingered between life and death. He lived; however, he remained blind in one eye. When the two men who had beat him were brought to trial, Donald Tippet asked that they be placed in his custody. One boy refused to change and was soon caught for another crime. But the other boy began to blossom under Donald Tippet's love. He went to college, and then on to medical school, becoming a surgeon, an eye surgeon. Hanging from the cross, Jesus looked upon those who had crucified him and spoke words of love: "Father, forgive them."

Fifth, loving is sacrificial. In Chesterton, Indiana, a 10-year-old boy named Doug and a few of his friends were playing in a creek when the torrential rains turned the creek into a raging river. Doug was sucked into the water. Some neighbors saw what happened. So a high school English teacher named Mark Thanos jumped into the turbulent waters to save the boy. Mark, though, wasn't that strong a swimmer. So, seeing Mark struggling, Mark's 74-year-old father John Thanos jumped in. What led a neighbor who wasn't that strong a swimmer to jump into raging water to save a boy? Why would an aging father risk his life to save his son? The answer, of course, is love. Unfortunately, both Mark and John Thanos, father and son, drowned. 10-year-old Doug survived. Later that day, Doug clung to his mother and cried, "I wish he didn't love me that much."³ But if we want to truly love, we need to be willing to give our lives. We're to share our own selves sacrificially. Jesus' love for God and for us resulted in him giving his life on the cross.

Sixth, love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated. We are called to love God by living in this world and loving our neighbor. When we love our neighbor, we're actually loving God and determining how God will judge us. Jesus said that at the Great Judgment, we will be judged according to how we have loved. May we all hear our Lord say to us, "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I

³ Sweet, Leonard, "The 2 Love Laws"

was in prison and you visited me... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'" (Matthew 25:31-46).

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; October 26, 2008