Deacon Randy Perkins
Exodus 22: 20-26
First Thessalonians 1: 5c-10
Mathew 22: 34-40

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
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A couple married for twenty years found themselves in a really rough patch. Like so many, they became distant and grew apart. The spark was gone. The husband, desperate for some kind of guidance, decided to ask his own very elderly father for advice.

So, on his next visit to the nursing home where his dad lived, he shared a very generalized history of their problems and said, "Dad, I just don't think I love her anymore. What should I do?"

His dad said, "You love your wife." The son said, "Dad, you misunderstood me; I said I *don't* love her anymore." And, again, his dad said, "You love your wife." The son recognized he'd made a mistake. His dad wasn't able to understand his situation, and his last hope for some helpful guidance seemed to be swirled in confusion.

Not only was his marriage falling apart, but he was losing his dad, too! He said, "Dad, you just don't get it. You're not hearing me right," and his dad interrupted and said, "Son, I am hearing you. You're not hearing me. If you want to repair your marriage, the first thing you need to do is go home and love your wife. In the son's mind, love was a feeling, a desire, an emotional state, which happens to us and that we hope stays with us. And, like the son in that story, we tend to view love primarily as an emotion—something we feel. And that understanding of love is understandable! Webster's Dictionary defines love as to "*feel* great affection for something."

Popular media sells the same definition. "Reality TV" shows us good-looking young people finding love in hot tubs, on sunny beaches, and riding horses in the mountains. But then when winter comes—or the show ends—they decide they're not in love anymore.

The elderly father defined love differently, much more broadly. Love, in his mind, wasn't just a feeling. More importantly, love was an action, a decision, a choice! An act of free will!

In today's gospel, when Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment, in typical Jesus fashion, He answered with two commandments: "Love God and love neighbor." In the original Greek, Matthew used the word "agapao." We're more familiar with "agape," one of the Greek nouns for love. Agapao is its verb form. Agapao is an action, not a noun, adjective, or adverb. Agapao doesn't describe how we feel, but rather it describes how we act, what we do.

When Jesus told the Pharisees that the greatest commandment is to love God and neighbor, He wasn't particularly concerned about their emotional RE-actions. He was concerned about their everyday actions. What were they doing to evidence their love for God and neighbor?

The Pharisees felt pretty good about their God-loving acts. They checked all the piety boxes. They said all the prayers. They offered all the sacrifices. They excelled at Temple worship. In their minds, they loved God to a tee.

But Jesus made clear that all the pious worship in the world wasn't enough. He made clear that loving God cannot be separated from loving other people. Living the Great Commandment doesn't only involve a personal, vertical relationship between us and God. Of course, it's primary, because relationship with God is what directs our lives.

But Jesus made clear that just as much as our vertical love of God is necessary, our horizontal love of everyone around us is equally important. The two are inextricably intertwined, and all the religious worship in the world cannot outweigh or overcome a failure to love each other!

So often, like the son in the struggling marriage, we confuse the commandment to love our neighbor with having certain defined *feelings* about them. But we all know that feelings are not easily controlled. I co-facilitate a Walking Through Grief group here on Wednesday evenings, and the feelings grieving people experience are all over the spectrum; many of them are negative: anger, loneliness, bitterness, resentment. What if I came into the group and said, "You know, I'm sorry you feel all these things, but God commands you not to feel that way. You are commanded to feel love." The idea is ludicrous.

The commandment to love God and love neighbor isn't an impossible command to *feel* a certain way about anything or anyone. It's not about denying the emotions we experience. God never asks us to do the impossible.

The commandment to love our neighbor is about how we act *despite* our emotions—how we act. It's about the free-will choices we make every day.

Of course, when the emotions are warm and fuzzy, loving neighbor is easy. Loving, in those situations, doesn't need to be commanded; it flows naturally.

The commandment to love our neighbor is specifically intended to address those situations where love doesn't feel natural and wouldn't be our human instinct. And in today's polarized social climate, an environment that thrives on pitting people against each other and feeds on promoting fear of the other, loving neighbor is as big of a challenge today as it was 2000 years ago!

In fact, many of the problems that divide us today divided people during the time of Moses! The commandment to love God and love neighbor wasn't anything new with Jesus. In our first reading today from Exodus, God commands the Israelites not to mistreat immigrants or other social outcasts; and God commands that they take care of the poor.

Again, God wasn't condemning the emotional reactions or feelings they had, but God was strongly condemning the way many of them were acting. "If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword . . . ."

Loving God and loving neighbor doesn't always come naturally or easily to us. Although the world has developed tremendously since the days of Moses, the challenge to choose to take the next loving act remains the greatest challenge of our times.

The challenge to *choose to act* lovingly to immigrants and the poor.

The challenge to *choose to act* lovingly to the least and the last.

We struggle with the same societal problems the Israelites struggled with thousands of years ago.

And the commandment to love our neighbor isn't limited to social justice, but it applies to all our daily interactions with all the people around us.

It's the challenge to choose to be patient with a spouse or partner when we're exhausted.

It's a challenge to take time to listen to a child or a parent when there are a hundred other things to do.

It's a challenge to reach out to someone who's isolated or struggling.

It's a challenge to forgive someone who's hurt us.

It's a challenge to *choose to act* lovingly when our emotions lead us to act otherwise.

That is the challenge. That is God's commandment. To *choose* to love!

Going back to the opening story, I often wonder how things worked out. It would be nice, it would make for a happy ending if the man left his dad, went home, and chose to love his wife and that she chose to love him in return.

But choosing to love is not always easy. Love is not always natural, and it doesn't always *feel* good. Love can make us uncomfortable. Afraid. Love often demands that we set aside our pride. And love—*agapao*—the love God commands of us, always comes at a cost!

Are we prepared to pay the price of love? Are we prepared to live the Greatest Commandment?