

Summing It Up

Matthew 22:34-40

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The primary command of all forms of Judaism is love (*ahavah*),
because the goal of that religion – which was the religion of Jesus –
is to teach us to love without any exterior motive or hope of personal gain.
This is loving that is done out of love for God,
and it helps us grow into the love of God –
and into being the image of God we are –
that is the goal of human existence.
When we live this way, the world becomes a place
of love, kindness, generosity, compassion, and open-heartedness.
This is the “good news” of the Prophets of Israel.
The Torah summarizes the ways to grow into this love through three positive commands:
to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love the stranger.

Passionate love cannot be commanded, of course.
What can be commanded are acts of love –
in the hope that performing acts of love toward others
will lead to feelings of love, which is the ideal.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might.”
We learn how to do this by reflecting on the Way of God (Torah),
experiencing God around us in God’s wondrous works and creatures,
delighting in God, and by leading others to do the same.
We do this so that “the Divine Name may be beloved through [us].”
By reflecting our religion in our actions – dealing honestly and speaking gently –
God becomes beloved by others.
In other words, people come to love God.

We cannot personally love each individual person in the world,
but we can desire the well-being of our neighbors
as much as we desire our own well-being.
In other words, we can show the same love and compassion towards others
and their property and belongings and hopes
as we have towards ourselves.
To put it succinctly, “all the things that you would want others to do for you,
do for others” (ibid.).
This is an essential component of Judaism because,
as the rabbis of Jesus’ time insisted in the 1st century CE,
“everyone is equally created in the image of God

and equally entitled to the benefits of God's planet"

Judaism also expands the concept of who is our "neighbor"
to include the stranger, the alien, the one who is "other":

"You shall love the stranger,
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Dt. 10:19)

and

"The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens;
you shall love the stranger as yourself,
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Lev. 19:34).

Again, the command is to strive for the ideal
by sincerely caring for the stranger, and not causing them any sorrow
but, instead, doing good things and dealing kindly with them.

There is no way to love God without loving others.

So it's no surprise that the Pharisee Hillel – the great rabbi Jesus so often quotes –
distilled all of the Torah, the Way of God, into

"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor:
that is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary"
(*Babylonian Talmud* Shabbat 31A).

Jesus made a similar summary that we hear this morning:

"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."

The love being commanded is not a love of the fleeting;

it is a love of the good, a love of God.

It is eternal.

"It is love for no cause other than the beloved" – God – "alone."

"Just as you love yourself not for pleasure or benefit,
so you should have no ulterior motive for loving your neighbor."

This loving is greater than our usual human love,
because it is without an exterior motive or cause.

This is loving that is done out of love for God.

And loving God is the goal of human existence.

As Christian theologian Ched Myer notes, living into these kinds of love –

all of which lead us ultimately to the love of God,
because our neighbors and the strangers in our midst
are all made in the image of God,
so loving them IS loving God –

living into these kinds of love with "generosity, compassion, and kindness
often provokes anger and resistance

from those who feel that their lives have been built around ‘being realistic’
[and] the assumption that ‘the real world’
requires you to dominate others before they dominate you.”
These people “resent the assertion that something else is possible
[because] they feel that you are invalidating everything they stand for.”
This is why the cross is such a powerful symbol for Christianity:
it reminds us that living in God’s way
is going to get us into trouble with the powers that be.
You will be crucified for living this way!
You will not be liked. That is a given.
At the same time, the cross is a symbol of hope,
because any power and any culture of domination
do not have the last word.
God does; there is resurrection!

That was good news in Jesus’ time,
when (as we heard last week) the Romans were cruelly occupying Israel.
The question in Jesus’ time was how to resist that imperial, dominating power
conscientiously and faithfully.
This is still good news in our time,
as we try to live into this great commandment to love,
conscientiously and faithfully,
in a culture that too often asks us to act otherwise.

It’s tempting to forget.
As Moses told the people before they entered the Promised Land:
“When the Eternal your God brings you into the land
that was sworn to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
to be assigned to you –
great and flourishing cities that you did not build,
houses full of all good things that you did not fill,
hewn cisterns that you did not hew,
vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant –
and you eat your fill,
take heed that you do not forget the Eternal
who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage”
(Dt. 6:10–12).

Or, as Robert Alter,
who is a professor of Hebrew language and comparative literature
at the University of California, Berkeley, explains:
“The full belly is the enemy of faith in Deuteronomy.
The comforts of prosperity are thought of as leading to complacency,
or perhaps even to . . . assimilationism – worshipping [other] gods . . .
Thus the history of Israel teeters on the edge of a precarious balance:
If Israel punctiliously adheres to the commands of its God,

it will prosper;
but when it prospers, it runs the danger of falling away from its loyalty to God”
How do we avoid this trap?

We can remind ourselves every day, as Jews and Christians have done for millennia,
that we are called to love God through loving our neighbors
and the strangers among us.

We can tell the stories of our own relationship with God.
And we can tell the faith stories of others who inspire us:
stories from the Bible, and stories of other s/heroes of faith.
All of this helps us remember who we are, and whose we are.

Today I want to share some excerpts from the *Journal*
written by the great Quaker, John Woolman.
His Journal is not only an important spiritual document;
it is the longest-published book in the history of North America other than the Bible.
It has been continuously published since 1774.

John Woolman is the man who, almost single-handedly,
convinced the Society of Friends (the Quakers)
to stop owning slaves and to work to abolish slavery.
He did so out of his love of God,
his love of the stranger (slaves)
because he believed slaves were created in the image of God,
and in ways that showed his love of his neighbor.
This was a challenge because, in the mid-1700s,
most Quakers were affluent, conservative slave-owners.
Woolman approached his fellow Quakers in a loving, nonjudgmental way,
with “gentle but clear and persistent persuasion.”
His approach was to raise questions such as:
What does the owning of slaves do to you as a moral person?
What kind of an institution are you binding over to your children?

As a result, by the end of the 18th century – long before the Civil War –
no Quakers owned slaves any longer.
They were the first religious group in America
to denounce and forbid slavery among its members.
In 1790, the Society of Friends petitioned the United States Congress for the abolition of slavery.

Who was John Woolman?

John Woolman was born to Quaker parents on October 19, 1720 at their family farm in New Jersey. He went to school with other Quaker children and Indian children in a little schoolhouse that was twenty feet square. After he finished his schooling, John worked on the farm but then began working as a clerk and a tailor in town. Because he was a good and careful writer, he was often asked to draw up legal documents for his employer and other people.

In 1756, John Woolman began his journal by writing: "I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of my experience of the goodness of God, and now, in the thirty-sixth year of my age, I begin this work. . . . Before I was seven years old I began to be acquainted with the operations of Divine love. Through the care of my parents, I was taught to read nearly as soon as I was capable of it; and as I went from school one day, I remember that while my companions were playing by the way, I went forward out of sight, and, sitting down, I read the twenty-second chapter of Revelation: "He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb, &c." In reading it, my mind was drawn to seek after that pure habitation which I then believed God had prepared for his servants. The place where I sat, and the sweetness that attended my mind, remain fresh in my memory." (p. 177).

There was another significant moment in his childhood when he learned how people become either tender-hearted or hard-hearted:

"I may here mention a remarkable circumstance that occurred in my childhood. On going to a neighbor's house, I saw on the way a robin sitting on her nest, and as I came near she went off; but having young ones, she flew about, and with many cries expressed her concern for them. I stood and threw stones at her, and one striking her she fell down dead. At first I was pleased with the exploit, but after a few minutes was seized with horror, at having, in a sportive way, killed an innocent creature while she was careful for her young. I beheld her lying dead, and thought those young ones, for which she was so careful, must now perish for want of their dam to nourish them. After some painful considerations on the subject, I climbed up the tree, took all the young birds, and killed them, supposing that better than to leave them to pine away and die miserably. In this case I believed that Scripture proverb was fulfilled, "The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel." I then went on my errand, and for some hours could think of little else but the cruelties I had committed, and was much troubled. Thus He whose tender mercies are over all his works hath placed a principle in the human mind, which incites to exercise goodness towards every living creature; and this being singly attended to, people become tender-hearted and sympathizing; but when frequently and totally rejected, the mind becomes shut up in a contrary disposition" (p. 178)

He became convinced that loving God must include loving all people, and also all creation:

"I kept steadily to meetings, spent first-day afternoons chiefly in reading the Scriptures and other good books, and was early convinced in my mind that true religion consisted in an inward life, wherein the heart does love and reverence God the Creator, and learns to exercise true justice and goodness, not only toward all men, but also toward the brute creatures; that, as the mind was moved by an inward principle to love God as an invisible, incomprehensible Being, so, by the same principle, it was moved to love him in all his manifestations in the visible world; that, as by his breath the flame of life was kindled in all animal sensible creatures, to say we love God as unseen, and at the same time exercise cruelty toward the least creature moving by his life, or by life derived from him, was a contradiction in itself" (pp. 181-182)

In 1743, when he was 23, he had an experience with slavery that changed him:

“My employer, having a negro woman, sold her, and desired me to write a bill of sale, the man being waiting who bought her. The thing was sudden; and though I felt uneasy at the thoughts of writing an instrument of slavery for one of my fellow-creatures, yet I remembered that I was hired by the year, that it was my master who directed me to do it, and that it was an elderly man, a member of our Society, who bought her; so through weakness I gave way, and wrote it; but at the executing of it I was so afflicted in my mind, that I said before my master and the Friend that I believed slave-keeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion. This, in some degree, abated my uneasiness; yet as often as I reflected seriously upon it I thought I should have been clearer if I had desired to be excused from it, as a thing against my conscience; for such it was.”

After that, he refused to write bills of sale for slaves or wills that included slaves as property. He would tell people, as he said, “in a friendly way that I could not write any instruments by which my fellow creatures were made slaves without bringing trouble on my own mind.”

In 1754 and 1762 respectively, he published the first and second parts of *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, in which he argued for the connection between Christianity and freedom. The idea that men and women are created equal in the image of God leads directly, he said, to “an idea of general brotherhood and a disposition easy to be touched with a feeling of each other's afflictions.”

During this time (1756) he wrote how an elderly man asked him to write a will that included slaves. John said, “I cannot write thy will without breaking my own peace,” and he then respectfully gave the man the reasons for his refusal. The man had someone else write the will but, when he needed to change it a few years later, he returned to John. They had, as John wrote, “much friendly talk on the subject and then deferred it.” The man returned a few days later, stating that he wanted to include directives for freeing his slaves. At that point, John agreed to write the will (p. 201).

In 1758, John preached a sermon against slavery in a rural town. Afterwards, he had dinner at Thomas Woodward’s home. When he discovered that the household “servants” were actually slaves, he slipped out of the house without saying a word. Woodward’s conscience was so troubled that the very next morning he decided to liberate his slaves.

Later that year, in December, John traveled to a number of Quaker communities. Many welcomed him, but in other places, he said, “our way was more difficult. I often saw the necessity of keeping down to that root from whence our concern proceeded, and have cause, in reverent thankfulness, humbly to bow down before the Lord, who was near to me, and preserved my mind in calmness under some sharp conflicts, and begat a spirit of sympathy and tenderness in me towards some who were grievously entangled by the spirit of this world” (p. 236).

John Woolman was a convincing, devout speaker. Once, when he was speaking, he forgot the interpreters who had been translating his words for his Indian listeners and poured out his heart in prayer. When he had finished, the Indian chief, Papunehang, put his hand on his own chest, over his heart, and said, “I love to feel where the words come from.”

In the summer of 1772, John Woolman sailed to England to visit the Quaker communities there. At first, he was coldly received. However, it is said that, as soon as he spoke, his spirit and devotion were recognized, and the London Yearly Meeting, for the first time in its history, included a statement condemning slavery. He traveled to York in September, and there became ill with smallpox. He died on October 7th, two weeks shy of his 52nd birthday (10/19). It was recorded that in his last hours his mind was full of “the happiness, the safety, and the beauty of a life devoted to following the Heavenly Shepherd.”

John Woolman once said: “I find that to be a fool as to worldly wisdom, and to commit my cause to God, not fearing to offend men, who take offence at the simplicity of truth, is the only way . . .”

How do we find the courage to live this way? The poet, Marge Piercy, reminds us:

Shema/V'ahavta (by Marge Piercy)

Shema

Hear, Israel, you are of God and God is one.

Praise the name that speaks us through all time.

V'ahavta

So you shall love what is holy with all your courage, with all your passion with all your strength.

Let the words that have come down shine in our words and our actions.

We must teach our children to know and understand them.

We must speak about what is good and holy within our homes

when we are working, when we are at play, when we lie down and when we get up.

Let the work of our hands speak of goodness.

Let it run in our blood

and glow from our doors and windows.

We should love ourselves, for we are of God.

We should love our neighbors as ourselves.

We should love the stranger, for we were once strangers in the land of Egypt and have been strangers in all the lands of the world since.

Let love fill our hearts with its clear precious water.

Heaven and earth observe how we cherish or spoil our world.

Heaven and earth watch whether we choose life or choose death.

We must choose life so our children's children may live.

Be quiet and listen to the still small voice within that speaks in love.

Open to that voice, hear it, heed it and work for life.

Let us remember and strive to be good.

Let us remember to find what is holy within and without.

Amen.

Sources:

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Texts:

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 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.’ 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.”

Deuteronomy 6: 1-14

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children, may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you

Leviticus 19:18 and 19:33-34

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.

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-19

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31A

On another occasion it happened that a certain pagan came before Shammai and said to him, “Make me a proselyte, on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” Thereupon he chased him away with the builder's measure that was in his hand. When the pagan came before Hillel, (he also asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah while standing on one foot) Hillel replied, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary; go and learn it.”

John Woolman's Journal:

To keep a watchful eye towards real objects of charity, to visit the poor in their lonesome dwelling-places, to comfort those who, through the dispensations of Divine Providence, are in strait and painful circumstances in this life, and steadily to endeavor to honor God with our substance, from a real sense of the love of Christ influencing our minds, is more likely to bring a blessing to our children, and will afford more satisfaction to a Christian favored with plenty, than an earnest desire to collect much wealth to leave behind us; for, “here we have no continuing city”; may we therefore diligently “seek one that is to come, whose builder and maker is God.” (p. 243, 1759 Epistle from the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting)