

“Blessed in the Concrete”  
Matthew 22:34-40

There’s an old story told of a child psychologist who spent many hours constructing a new driveway at his home. Just after he had smoothed the surface of the freshly poured concrete, his small children chased a ball across the driveway, leaving deep footprints. The man yelled at them with a stream of angry words. His wife scolded him. "You should be ashamed of yourself. You're a psychologist who's supposed to love children." The fuming man replied, "I love children in the abstract, not in the concrete!" (*Bits 'n Pieces*, November 5, 1998. p. 18)

Aside from its horrible pun, that father said more than he realized as it's possible to love a concept more than a reality; to speak the right words while finding that our heart is somewhere else, or to describe what other people should do while failing to follow the same counsel. Knowing that kind of struggle makes the words we read moments ago all the more remarkable for not only do they call for a life of love, but they were embodied by the one who spoke them.

That Biblical account might well contain Jesus' most important message. To be sure, anytime he speaks we are to take notice and some Bibles make that point visually by having Jesus' words appear in red. Yet even without a red-letter edition of Scripture, Jesus' words this morning stand out as they get to the heart of his ministry and call to us as his disciples.

On the day described in our passage, tension between Jesus and Jewish leadership had reached a breaking point as in an effort to discredit him before the crowds they pose a series of questions. It started with disciples of the Pharisees and some Herodians who asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay a tax to Rome. Next, some Sadducees posed a far-fetched question about a woman who had outlived seven husbands, asking which one would be her spouse in eternity. Those questions came on the same day as our scene when the Pharisees try again. This time they send one that Matthew calls a lawyer, though a more accurate description would be to understand him as a scribe or professional theologian. He was an expert in the Jewish law—our Old Testament—and asked Jesus "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

We know the question is a set-up as Matthew tells us the lawyer was trying to trap Jesus. He wasn’t interested in the answer as a matter of clarification, but again hopeful that Jesus would be tripped up by his own words. There were 613 distinct religious commands Jews of that era were expected to obey. 248 of them were positive ones describing what persons should do and 365 of the laws were of the "Thou shall not" variety. Given that number, for Jesus to pick any one law would have caused pushback, leading them to accuse him of denigrating the other 612.

Jesus knew the risk, yet he answers even so with words that are today known as the Great Commandment. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” he replied. “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." It was another skillful reply, for instead of singling out one law, Jesus names two that summarize all the rest. Once again, his response leaves accusers silent. Jesus then poses a question to the Pharisees that they cannot answer. “From that day,” Mathew concludes, “[no one] dared to ask him any more questions.”

It was a moment when Jesus offers a summary of what it means to be his disciple; an affirmation declaring that every other command found in Scripture, every other faithful act God desires from us builds upon those two convictions. That if we love God with all that we have to offer and love our neighbor as we do ourselves, we are on the right path. It's the kind of teaching

that is easy to hear and affirm, but one that is difficult to put into action.

For when we start ponder the sorts of things Jesus calls us to do--turn the other cheek, give of our treasures, forgive seventy times seven times--we realize it isn't a passive love he taught. When we are in a dispute with a next-door neighbor or share a cubicle with a co-worker who holds convictions vastly different than our own, when we go through times when it is tough to love ourselves, much less someone whose actions we reject, we come to realize this love Jesus spoke of isn't an abstract concept, but one that is concrete, specific, and tough. Nor is such a love one meant only for God while putting up with human beings, but a love that causes us to treat each other and ourselves differently because we all have been created in God's image. It was a powerful command Jesus offered, but a challenge to make concrete in any life.

Matt Fitzgerald, a pastor in Chicago, often contributes to a devotional that I read and in one of them years ago tells of someone he knew. "I once worked with a waiter I'll call Alex," he writes. "His car was covered with bumper stickers proclaiming an admirable allegiance to every social justice cause imaginable. His heart was on fire for the plight of Native Americans, marginalized workers, the earth, oppressed minorities everywhere. But he was awful to work with. He'd steal tables from other waiters, shout at dishwashers, refuse to tip out the busboys. He didn't say 'hello' at the start of a shift. He didn't say 'goodbye' when he left. He was unfailingly rude. One night after Alex marched out, an older waiter learned against the bar and sighed, 'Alex is one of those hippies who loves humanity but can't stand people.'

"You don't have to feel affectionate toward whoever is next to you," Fitzgerald adds. "Warm feelings are not what Jesus meant when he commanded love. He meant dogged, tenacious, commitment... Anyone can slap a bumper sticker on their car. But it takes a real Christian to be kind to an exasperating colleague, patient with a long-winded church member or committed to an ornery teenager... When you practice Christ-like love inside your walls, at work or home or church, you'll soon discover that these walls cannot hope to contain it." (Fitzgerald, Matt, "Fake Hippy Love," *stillspeaking*, 8/21/14) In other words, the kind of love Jesus described is tough and tangible, but it is what we are taught and trained to do.

Like all of you, I awoke on Monday to the horrific news out of Las Vegas. Like all of you, I was again dismayed and saddened, frustrated and angered that such tragedies continue to occur. Like all of you, I have been holding those families and survivors in prayer as they seek healing and comfort. And like all of you, I have celebrated the stories of heroism and courage by first responders and others that have emanated from that urban battlefield. Let me tell you one.

Travis and Haley Haldeman were among the thousands enjoying the Route 91 Harvest Festival that night when the first pops sounded. They thought they were hearing fireworks, but when the next volley started the off-duty firefighter and his wife realized they had to take cover. During a brief pause in the gunfire, Travis turned to Haley and told her she had to run and he had to stay. "[Our team] is really good at their job," he said. "They're going to get this guy quick. Run to the Tropicana, and I'll meet you at home." They separated. Still hearing shots, she ran to a podium and crawled underneath it. She told a reporter later that she kept saying the Lord's Prayer over and over: "Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Meanwhile, Travis was responding to others. He used his belt as a tourniquet and carried the injured man about 100 feet to a medical tent. Along the way, he saw a group of about half-dozen who were frozen in fear. "We need to get out of here," he told them. "We can't be part of the problem; let's move." Haley made it safely to the hotel and borrowed a friend's cell phone to

reach him. She made it home before midnight; about three and a half hours later, Travis did, too.

“I gave him a big old hug and then gave him a little bit of a shove for not being together all throughout it,” Haley said. “I prepared for the kind of man I married. I know he’s that kind of guy, but in the moment, you have the selfishness of ‘I want my person with me.’” For his part, Travis knew he had to help. “I looked around and saw a lot of people who could benefit greatly from my experience and calmness. It was just a split-second gut decision that I had to make.” (Bui, Lyn. “When the bullets came down in Las Vegas, he told his wife to run. He needed to stay.” *The Washington Post*, 10/7/17)

Friends, to act in response to the Great Commandment includes intellectual agreement; times we affirm with our heart and mind the correctness of his words. Yet more than only thinking it, more than only nodding our head, Jesus calls us to live that kind of love in concrete and specific ways. And to do so precisely because that is the way God’s love comes to us.