

2/6/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

We had a call from Di Suderman let us know that she is scheduled for knee replacement surgery tomorrow in Wichita; we will include her and Lee in our prayers.

Gracious God, we thank you for all good gifts, for the sunshine of the last couple of days and for the moisture received from the ice and snow. We thank you for the gifts of friends and family, of fellow Jesus-followers and the journey we're on together. We thank you for the wonders and mysteries of nature as you've created it, for the privilege we've been given to steward and care for the earth and for each other. Thank you, God, for the diversity and creativity we see in your world. God, we thank you for your love, for your mercy and kindness. We thank you for your Spirit that guides us and empowers us to *be* that kind of love in your world.

God of mercy, along with our thanks we offer you our prayers of petition, acknowledging that you are the Love that can hear and hold and respond to our prayers. We continue to pray for Leona and Norman. Continue to uphold them, to comfort them and to give them courage. We thank you for the doctors and nurses who continue to offer Leona such good care. Give them wisdom and compassion as they continue to seek solutions and health for Leona.

We pray for the Church family as they approach the days of travel and then appointments and procedures for Braxton in Boston. Grant his doctors clarity and wisdom as they offer their skill and expertise for Braxton's well-being. We pray for safe travel mercies for Amanda and her cousin and Braxton. We pray for Kelcey and Natalie as they stay here at home. Give comfort and courage to the whole family, God. Let them feel your love and support.

We pray for the Lindeman family as they travel back home today after services for Kyle yesterday in St. Louis. Give them strength and comfort through Kyle's loss and particularly for Kyle's mother and sister as they adjust now to life without his physical presence.

We pray for Di as she anticipates knee surgery tomorrow. Be with her doctor and all who will care for her. Calm her spirit and give her confidence and peace. Be also with Lee, God, as he struggles with his own health concerns. Send your Spirit of mercy and healing to them.

God we pray for those who are struggling with illness of all kinds through these winter months. We ask for healing and wholeness for those who are sick. We ask for perseverance and determination for those who continue to give care in the medical field, those who are exhausted, frustrated and frazzled. Continue to give what is needed for service and care each day.

We think of our larger community, God. We pray for those in leadership. Give them wisdom and hearts of integrity that will seek the welfare of all. We pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ near

and far – all who are seeking to follow you, Jesus, in spirit and in truth. Strengthen our bonds of love in you, through your Holy Spirit.

We pray for the church in Burkina Faso as they struggle under difficult political circumstances. Give them strength to be faithful to their call. We pray for your children along the Russia/Ukraine border as the threat of war seems to grow stronger there. Be present there also, with your Spirit. Give comfort and courage to those who are caught in that situation – who are simply trying to survive and find themselves in the midst of turmoil and fear.

Be with others around your world who are without shelter, food, the necessities of life. Be with those who are working in those situations to bring goodness and needed supplies. Give them strength and extra measures of your love.

Be with us now, God, as we continue to worship, to listen to your word, to sing, to offer our whole selves to you as a response to your love for us. Amen.

SERMON – PASTOR CALEB YODER LOVING GOD WITH YOUR WHOLE SELF

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

These are some of the most important words in scripture. In fact, when Jesus was asked, “which is the greatest commandment,” he pointed to these words – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” along with the commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself.

They are part of the Shema prayer that devout Jews are to recite daily. “Shema” is the very first word – “Hear!” or “Listen!”

For this month of February, we are going to focus on *love*. I know that seems pretty basic, and hopefully we talk about love and practice love plenty already here at Alexanderwohl.

Never hurts to do it more. Last month, we saw that living out the vision for the church found in the New Testament is not possible without love – Christ’s love, love for one another, and love of our neighbors.

You can think of this as an extension of this question of what it really means to be church, and wrestling with how to live into a fuller vision of being a church in mission together. Love is critical to being church, and of course love extends to all aspects of life.

But you’ve probably wondered before, what does it really mean to love God? We can’t see God or completely comprehend God. You may even have questions about whether it makes sense in today’s world to believe in God.

Let’s turn to these verses in Deuteronomy for some insight.

I learned these words in Hebrew in seminary. A rather wooden translation would be:

Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord one!

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your throat [soul], and with all your muchness.

The beginning words say that YHWH the God of Israel is alone to be worshipped. The ancient Israelites are commanded not to combine worship with YHWH with the gods or practices of neighboring religions. “YHWH one” probably means either “YHWH alone,” or maybe “YHWH is not manifested as some other god.”

“You shall love the Lord your God...”

There is nothing particularly special about the word love itself. In both English and Hebrew, it’s a flexible word that we use for all kinds of things both noble and not so noble.

God’s love for people as well as people’s love and affection. It is said of friendship and familial love as well as romantic love. The same word is said of Samson “falling in love” with Delilah – probably not a very pure love – or even people loving food and drink.

So, we have to fill in more detail about what kind of love we are actually talking about.

“Love the Lord your God with all your **heart**...”

Austin and I were leafing through an illustrated book we have about the human body one day. We were on the page with the circulatory system. It had a diagram of the chambers of the heart, showing blood being pumped to the lungs, then back to the heart and out to the body.

You never know when a four-year-old will ask a deep theological question.

Austin pointed to the heart. “God lives in *there*?” he asked confused. It’s true, it doesn’t seem like it would be very comfortable trying to squeeze into one of those ventricles. It’s about as hard to explain the ways we use the word “heart” as it is to explain how God can be everywhere and also live in a heart.

In English, we associate the heart with the emotions. The mind or brain is where thinking happens. When an English speaker hears “The heart is deceitful above all things,” in Jeremiah 17:9, we assume that means you can’t trust your feelings! Better to stick with cold, hard logic.

But Hebrew has no concept of a “brain,” and not even really a separate concept of “mind.” The Hebrew word for “heart” is about as close as you will get. For the ancient Israelites, both feeling *and* thinking took place in the heart.

You know with your heart. You have wisdom with your heart. You make choices out of your deepest desires with your heart.

The commandment doesn’t say, “Love God by ignoring your heart,” but “Love God *with* your whole heart.” It’s pretty inclusive of everything, your thought process, your deepest desires, your joy and

your pain, your intentional choices. If you have ever noticed that the New Testament version of the Shema adds the word “mind,” now you see why, because “mind” was already included in the original Hebrew for heart.

You’d think that with such an expansive term we are set if we just love God with our whole heart. But that’s not all. “Love the Lord your God with your whole **soul**...”

Here again, English gives a different picture than the original Hebrew. We associate “soul” with the part of you that hopefully lives on after death. That’s not really what “soul” means in Hebrew.

The word originally meant “throat.” And when you think about it, all you need to be alive passes through your throat – every breath, every sip of water, and all the nutrients you take in.

The “soul” in Hebrew is your aliveness. You don’t *have* a “soul.” You *are* a “soul” – a living, breathing, being. It is the life you have from the breath that enters your lungs and the blood that courses through your veins.

It’s a very common word, and sometimes doesn’t even get translated, such as when the psalmist says, “My soul thirsts for you,” a translation might put that as “*I* thirst for you.”

Like heart, this concept of soul includes your inner being and your deepest desires. It’s a lot more of you than simply agreeing in your head with the statement: “loving God is a good thing to do.”

The last word, “**strength**” is also an interesting one. Because it too is *very* common and usually means “very, exceedingly, or much,” like God saying that the creation is *very* good, or Cain being *very* angry with his brother.

It’s loving God with your “exceedingly.” With your “muchness.” Not with your physical strength per se. It’s probably more the idea of loving with “*all you’ve got*.”

The teaching goes on: You are to keep these words in your heart and recite them to your children. Actually, it says “sharpen” the words to your children like you’d sharpen a blade you use regularly.

Now that we’ve established loving God with your whole self, it’s also loving God in all aspects of life. When you sitting at home or walking on the road, when you lie down to sleep and when you get up in the morning. Tie these words as symbols to your hands and your foreheads.

The Jewish tradition has historically taken these verses very literally to the point of devising phylacteries or little boxes to tie specific verses of the Torah to your hand and forehead. You can think of it a little like the daily, tactile reminder most married people have of their marriage covenant in the form of a wedding ring.

If we aren’t going to follow this quite so literally, we do have to be intentional and creative about who we develop practices and habits to remind us of our faith commitment on a day-to-day basis.

It’s not just taking our kids to church, or even telling them what we believe in once, but making notable daily choices that we can explain to children. “We do this because this is a way to love God.”

While it may be small, we get at this a little in our house with prayers before meals, and by reading children's books that tell the story of Jesus. Maybe we could share with each other ideas of simple habits that are reminders of our faith.

WHAT IS LOVE OF GOD?

So, coming back to our original question: what does it mean to love God? We will never fully answer that, but I offer four ways to love God that I believe are consistent with the verses we've been looking at.

First, we love God as our creator, the One who gave us life. We also love God as our redeemer, the One who offers abundant life in Christ.

Although not specifically in the verses we heard, throughout Deuteronomy is the constant reminder that God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt. This is who God is – their rescuer. Leaving slavery was God's act of grace, which God did *before* the people received the words of the Law.

We love God in our hearts and desire when we have a sense of gratitude for the gift of life, for God's grace, and for the hope that we have in Christ. Next week, I want to focus on being loved, because we will quickly run dry if we aren't able to receive the love of God and others in our inner being.

Second, a theme repeated often in Deuteronomy is that we love God by following God's commandments. As followers of Jesus, it's true we don't try to literally following the specific commandments of the Old Testament Law as they applied to an ancient people group.

But this same idea is part of New Testament faith in a little different form. Jesus said in the gospel of John: "If you love me, you will do what I command..." and he makes it clear that the command is to love. Love for one another and love for the hurting. It's true that doesn't fully answer what specific actions are you supposed to do or not do – that requires wisdom, discipleship, and following the lead of the Spirit.

But it's clear enough that love for God isn't just a feeling, or thinking holy thoughts. It has to translate into the way we live. This is loving God with our "strength," with our "muchness."

Love for God also takes the form of some type of prayer or contemplation. Again, not for the sake of having holy thoughts or being "religious" or "spiritual." It's that part of being human is needing to stop, to rest, to be still, to listen to our inner being. We won't have the fuel or wisdom for loving action otherwise. I know this is an area where I still wish to grow.

Prayer isn't about saying certain words. One very simple practice is to breathe in, imagining God saying "I love you" to you. Being conscious of that breath as life flowing into you. Then as you breath out, you respond to God with "I love You."

Our verses in Deuteronomy name the fact that love for God needs to come from the heart, from our inner being, from our inner desire.

This is called intrinsic motivation, as opposed to extrinsic motivation, which might be doing something to please your mother or out of social pressure. Doing what people in your life expect you to do may turn out to not be what love of God is really about.

Extrinsic motivation is not always bad, but if that's all we got, it leads to burn-out or even hypocrisy. Deuteronomy captures the importance of starting with the heart.

That means listening to yourself to know deep down, what does motivate you? What do you know deep down your life has to be about?

My final thought is that we very often love God *through*. I mean that as a partial answer to the problem of "God" feeling invisible, undefined, or mysterious.

We love God *through* our love of others.

We love God *through* love of creation and aiming to care for creation.

I am moved by these words that the character Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamosov* says in his final teaching:

"Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will begin to perceive the divine mystery in all things... Love the animals: God has given them the rudiments of thought and joy untroubled."

We love God *through* joyfully and creatively exercising our gifts, doing what you know makes you come alive.

The point is not: "how can my life be as enjoyable and fulfilling as possible," which sometimes is what we are really thinking when we talk about living out our passions. A better question is "what can I contribute?" "What can I learn to contribute better?"

Love God in your deepest self and in every part of yourself.

Love God in everything that you do.

Love God in all your daily movements.

Let your life speak the message of love.

There's the challenge we are left with. We will do it imperfectly. It is a lifelong journey.

Our well will be dry unless we know ourselves to be deeply and dearly loved, when we are transformed by God's love for us, which is where we will turn next Sunday.

Questions:

1. How might you remind yourself at various times of the day, every day, to let loving God be your focus and purpose?

2. Does it come easier to love God with your mind, as opposed to your heart, or strength? How do you learn to love God with all of your self, no holding back?
3. How can we find ways to talk about loving God in daily life with our families and associates?

BENEDICTION

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May the grace of Christ

That daily renews our lives,

And the love of God

That enables us to love all people,

And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit

That unites us as one body,

Make us keen to discern

And prompt to obey the complete will of God

Until we meet again, through Jesus Christ our Lord.