

Sermon for 19 Pentecost Yr A, 23/10/2011
Based on Matt 22:34-40
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“Love is the main thing”

Several years ago now, I heard a speaker who told us: “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” He had a point. You and I do, at times tend to go off in all directions, don't we? I've discovered that actually there are only a handful of people who do multitasking well. Most of us do not multitask well. Unfortunately, at times, it is far too easy to get side-tracked by having too many irons in the fire at once. When that happens, you can lose your focus in life. You can become rather frustrated with yourself because you have too little time to devote to doing a good job with all of those irons in the fire. You can forget what is top priority in life.

As a chaplain in ministry with seniors; I have observed over the years how quickly things change. One day a senior might be living in their home, which is filled with all kinds of material possessions. Many of those material possessions have become very important to them over the years. Their home is packed to the rafters with stuff—never mind that they haven't opened some of those boxes for umpteen years. They reason that one day they'll need it—even though when the time comes to find it, well, it's like looking for a needle in the haystack. They give up after a few hours of unsuccessful searching, and go out and buy another one!

Anyways, one day this senior is enjoying the lovely sunshiny day and having a great game out on the golf course. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, in mid-swing; they are hit like a freight train with a stroke and fall helplessly onto the grass. Someone calls 911 with their cell phone; the ambulance comes; takes them to the hospital. The doctor tells

them it's going to be a long road to recovery; and they are likely at risk of another stroke too, which could be fatal.

Recovery is slow—seems like an eternity. Finally, they are told that they require too much care to remain in their own home. So they have to move into a nursing home. Now how things have changed! Goodbye to the golf clubs, golf cart. So-long to ninety-nine percent of all those material possessions. Now there is a careful sifting through all of that stuff to figure out what is really important—what do I really need? The senior ends up with only a handful of possessions; among them is the cross that had hung above their bed for many years; a few family pictures; and a hymnal; a prayer book and the old family Bible; plus a few other personal effects. The rest of all those possessions—although missed, are not super important anymore.

In today's gospel, Jesus is asked a very important question. The question was most likely a common one among faithful Jews. You see, there were 613 laws in the Torah. The faithful would ask if those laws ought to be prioritized. Was it possible to sum up those laws by making one or two laws the most important? So, Jesus was asked: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Obviously Jesus agreed with his questioner that it is important to prioritize the 613 laws; to sum up those laws in order to keep the main thing the main thing. So Jesus answers by saying: " '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 neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Several years ago, our daughter was in a conversation with us and we were discussing the importance of education—emphasising how important it is in terms of getting jobs and improving one's quality of life.

Then our daughter, in a profound statement, told us: “Education is important, but it’s not the most important thing.” We then asked her, “So what is the most important thing?” She answered: “God is and loving God is the most important thing.” We were overjoyed to hear that answer from our young daughter.

As we reflect on loving God with all of our heart, soul and mind; we may be asking: “What does such love for God really look like in everyday life?”

In answer to that, I love the old familiar story, which dates back to the fourteenth century. The story tells of an old woman who once walked the streets of Strasbourg with a pail of water in one hand and a flaming torch in the other.

When someone asked her what she was going to do with these things; she told them that she was going to put out the flames of hell with the water and burn up heaven with the torch. Why do that? Well, her answer was then people would love God for God’s own self without the fear of being punished in hell or the desire to be rewarded in heaven.¹ The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing—loving God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind and placing no conditions on that love.

The best example of unconditionally loving God with our whole self is the life, teachings, sufferings and death of Jesus. He is still our perfect example of the first and greatest commandment. Jesus’ love of God was unconditional—he loved God without the fear of punishment or the promise of reward. He gave his all by dying on the cross.

His love for God was, however, inseparable from loving the neighbour as loving one’s self. Such love translates into everyday, practical living in a genuine way. Loving neighbour as you love yourself reminds me of the following story.

An elderly gentleman had come into a grocery store and was navigating down the aisles as if he were drunk—bumping into things

and knocking stuff of the shelves. Some of the customers thought the chap had too much to drink. However one person approached the fellow and asked him if he was blind and if he could help him find what he needed. The elderly gentleman admitted that he was legally blind and yes, he would appreciate some help. He then said that he had recently moved into the neighbourhood—he would need some time to figure out where everything was in the store before he could find things himself. He also apologised for making such a mess in the store.²

The story is instructive in that what we see happening on the surface may not be a truthful way of interpreting what is really happening. There are situations like this where we need to look and listen and think carefully before we make hasty, incorrect judgements. Love of neighbour is willing to look, listen and think carefully and then responds in an empathetic, caring way appropriate to the situation.

So, as Jesus teaches us in today's gospel; loving God with our whole being and loving neighbour as we love ourselves are always bonded together. You cannot love God and hate your neighbour or yourself. You cannot love your neighbour and yourself and hate God. The Russian writer Dostoyevsky knew this truth very well, and somewhere in his writings³ he tells the following story of a woman evangelist travelling through Russia and speaking a message of God's love. The tragic irony though was that this woman was very intolerant of other people. She preferred to be alone. This boy lapped his soup; that woman laughed too much; that man snored too loudly. Dostoyevsky then tells us: "Although she loved God in general, she couldn't stand [human beings] in particular." So as Jesus said, we keep the main thing the main then when we love both God with our all and love our neighbour as ourselves—for on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Amen.

1 I've come across this story frequently, but am not certain of its origins.

2 I am most grateful to Rebecca Nordeman of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, for sharing this story with us at our annual Good Samaritan Society Spirituality and Wholeness Workshop in Lethbridge, Alberta on October 12, 2011.

3 I am, unfortunately, unable to remember the source.