

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost - A Proper 25 (2026)

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

‘Jesus said, “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. ”’ In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As you may know, I don't title my sermons; I suspect it's because I'm not particularly creative. If I was to title today's sermon, it would be 'Mission: Impossible.' I suspect you all recall the amazing secret agent thriller that originated in the mid-1960s and ran on television until 1973 that featured the exploits of the Impossible Mission Force (IMF), who were sent out on dangerously challenging, virtually impossible missions, with that famous line, 'Should you choose to accept it.' The agent always did.

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, we are charged with our own 'Mission: Impossible': to love God with *all* our heart, *all* our soul, and *all* our mind; and while we're at it, to love *our* neighbor as ourselves. In other words, to love what God loves with every aspect of our being: our hearts, souls, and minds. Jesus tells the lawyer that everything else follows from these two commandments. Love of God naturally leads to loving neighbor and, in turn, loving neighbor reflects one's love of God. These two passages, the first portion from Deuteronomy and the second from the Book of Leviticus, summarize Jesus' mission and ministry.

Two of the many questions before us today are, ‘Have we accepted this mission?’ and, if so, how are we doing?’ Others include ‘How do we love God with all our being?’ How do we love our neighbors? How does loving God and neighbor influence our actions, priorities, and relationships? How does belonging to a community of faith shape and support our ability to undertake this impossible task? Can we accomplish this impossible mission?

I’ll start with the last question. Can we actually accomplish this impossible mission to love God and our neighbor? The answer comes with a caveat. We can’t do it by ourselves. We can with God’s help. Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, to which they replied, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus told them that with man, it would be impossible, but with God, all things are possible. So, can we love God and our neighbor? Yes, but only with the assistance of God’s Spirit moving within us.

Let’s go back to the beginning. The lawyer asked Jesus which commandment was greatest, and Jesus responded with what we call the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is One LORD,” a confession of belief in the One God. He continues that this love is demonstrated by loving God with one’s whole being, heart, soul, and mind. This reading from Deuteronomy continues that this commandment shall be taught to one’s children and family, and that obedience will bring rewards and disobedience will bring punishment. Jesus then follows up with a listing of laws found in Leviticus, including (1) Do not steal, do not lie, and do not deceive one another, (2) do not defraud or rob from your neighbor, (3) do not reap or harvest to the very edges of your field; leave what is left for the poor and the foreigner, (4) do not turn to idols or make metal gods for yourselves, for I am the LORD your God.

I'll get to what Scripture says about loving neighbors in a moment. For now, let's focus on how we can love God, and how we can learn to love God. From the beginning of Genesis, God sought a relationship with humankind. He made it possible for humans to live in peace and security if we followed the kingdom's rules. But we didn't, and we still suffer the consequences of that disobedience. That said, God still wants a relationship with us. He is always available; it's up to us to choose to be in a relationship with him.

For believers, this relationship, our learning to love God with our whole being, includes ways we get to know God better. Jesus uses the image of a vine, with us as the branches attached to it, providing sustenance for growth and life. This is what it means to 'abide' in/with him, to be inseparable from the source of our very existence. As we abide with God, we grow in grace and knowledge of him. Through worship, we learn and experience how to revere and awe the majesty, wonders, and mystery of God. We learn to worship with passion and conviction, to give generously and abundantly, to serve joyfully and willingly, and to pray fervently and continually. We learn the value of living and learning in community, a place where joys and sorrows are shared and supported. We learn that grace and mercy are everlasting, lavished on those who seek to follow the ways of God and his kingdom.

As we learn to love God more fully, we learn what it means and what we need to do to reflect that love to our neighbors. Personally, I find it easier to love my 'neighbors' in the abstract, in countries overseas or in communities both near and far from my own. Using some of my resources to support the work of various organizations that are actually doing the work 'on the ground.' It's easier and requires little of me. I don't think giving to my 'neighbor' this way is wrong, but it obviously isn't 'complete.' Jesus calls us to love our neighbor in the 'particular,' not abstract. For example, we are to love our 'enemy,' which means we must identify who that person is, not some amorphous 'group.' This is way more difficult, but more honest. We can reconcile with a person; not so sure about a 'group.'

Jesus' call to love our neighbor, as you all can attest, can be challenging, if not seemingly downright impossible. The parable commonly known as the Good Samaritan illustrates this very clearly. The surprising Samaritan did the unexpected by helping the traveler left for dead in the ditch. We learn from that teaching that our neighbor is whoever is in need, whoever is hungry, and, by extension, whoever is in prison, whoever needs consoling, whoever needs friendship, whoever is not like us, whoever we can't stand. Our neighbor includes those faceless individuals served by others and supported by us, but they are also those who demand our attention whether in this church or on the street; in our breakfast group or at the shelter; among those who bring us joy and among those who make us angry, those who are hurting, despondent, depressed, and for whom hope is no longer a perceived reality.

In our Baptismal Covenant we are asked whether we will continue to be together in communal worship, to persevere in resisting evil, to repent, to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and to work for justice as we respect the dignity of every human being, to which we respond "I/We will, with God's help." WITH GOD'S HELP!!!! This tells us that we cannot love God or our neighbor by ourselves and in our own strength, no matter how hard we try. Yes, we have a responsibility to do what we can to fulfill these two great commandments, but we cannot do so fully without God's help. It is only by God's grace and mercy, and the power of the Spirit who opens the eyes of our hearts to see the needs of our neighbors, that allows us to seek and serve willingly as we offer hope and freedom to those who feel trapped by life, bring joy to those in misery, and peace to those in chaos.

That is what serving neighbors looks like. But it's also saying 'hi' to someone who looks lost or distracted, telling Bible stories to residents of memory care units, saying 'thank you' to caregivers, and picking up the difference in the bill for someone short on cash at the grocery store checkout. Small acts of kindness, along with extraordinary acts of generosity in loving our neighbors, all flow from our

desire to please and love God. On these two commandments to love both God and neighbor, Jesus said, hang everything else. Yes, they do!!! With God's help, they will become our standard of living in the kingdom where a camel can go through the eye of a needle, and Mission: Impossible becomes Mission: Accepted.