

LESSONS IN LIVING

Untitled

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
June 6, 2010

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

In June we are going to have a sermon series that won't be complete. What I want to do during this month is look at some pillars of sanity that were in the early church but are not there anymore. They are there in scripture, but they are not lived out in the church, and as we go through them I think you will see these are very clear callings that self identify as essential pillars of the faith and most Christians don't even know what they are.

The first one we are going to look at this week is called the Shema. You just heard it read. When Jesus was asked what is the most important commandment he did something very strange because everybody was thinking he was going to say one of the Ten Commandments. That's what you'd expect--Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal; that he would choose one of those as the most important. Instead he quoted from the Shema, a Jewish text. *Hear, O Israel, God is one and you are to love with all your heart, mind, and strength.* It can be translated in different ways. The heart, mind, strength, is one way of talking about it, but it means with your whole being, your whole person.

Now it's fascinating to me, that when Jesus is asked to put everything in a thimble, he says something that is virtually unrecognizable in most churches. Love, love, and it's more explicit than that, but it boils down to love. In this passage it says write it on your arm, put it on your forehead, make sure it's in your mouth and your life; when you get up in the morning say it, when you go to sleep say it; that's not to be taken literally. One of the best ways to escape the call to love is to take the Bible literally. Some of the meanest people I've ever met took the Bible literally, not on purpose, but as a way of not having to live out the Sermon on the Mount. I'm sure that there are people who have written it on their arm and on their forehead and that kind of thing, but still do not embody love. It's just like if scripture says "my praise will always be on your lips", I'm sure there's somebody who has the word "praise" tattooed on them. Somewhere in the world there is somebody who literally fulfills scripture by not doing what it's asking us to do.

One of the most important decisions you will ever make in your life, if not the most important, is whether your spiritual life will be animated out of fear or out of love. There are lots of disguises for fear. If your Christianity is a rescue from hell, that's fear. It may be disguised very well, but you're not motivated to Christ-like loving so much as trying to get out of a hellish punishment. Jesus said love fulfills the law and the scriptures. The letter of John says if you have love you have God, for God is love. The church starts jerking right away when you say something like that. Obviously it has to be deeper than human affections, but one of the points I want to make today, and I've made every Sunday for the last twenty years, is that without love Christianity is just another religion. Without love the Bible is one of the most dangerous books on the planet, and the other competitors are also religious scripts. Without love religion

is evil, because it expresses what is most important to us and when it is animated by fear, when you are motivated by fear, it will result in violence. You may not do it. It may be your children who do it. It may be a student of yours that does it. The foundation is love and a church that does not organize around love as the central organizing principle is no different than a gang. It just has fancier clothes. Different symbols, different street colors. Is that what they call them?

When I was in college, I wanted to figure out why there are so many different views of Christianity. And of course it's very motivating when one of them says you are going to burn for all eternity if you don't do what they say. But Albert Schweitzer said something that really transformed my search. He said there are two things that call themselves Christianity. One is the religion **of** Jesus which is the Sermon on the Mount, and the rest of them are religions **about** Jesus. And they are like night and day different. So, what I think is that the human emotion of love is as deep as we get, as strong as it gets for us. That doesn't mean that exhausts God, but you start there--that wonderful experience of being in love. The sky is different, the wind feels different, you look at people on the street, it's different, it's euphoric. What theology does is takes that little love and make it universal. What theology *should be* is the picture of what the world looks like if you fell in love with everybody and everything at the same time. Theology should be love poetry, but universal love poetry. Cosmic love poetry. But it says God is one. And that's where most people stop, right? You drop the love part. Even the people who write it on their forehead will sometimes take off this part about loving with all of your heart, all of your mind, and all of your strength, because that's real inconvenient for the organized church. To love with all your mind means nobody can think for you. To love with all your heart means nobody can tell you who to love. To love with all your strength means nobody can tell you what to do. Now you may need to coordinate that, you may need to discipline it. But that commandment is for living a kind of authenticity, and a kind of integrity that disqualifies you from most religions. To get into most religions, you have to say you believe things you don't have any idea about. How many of you, in order to join the church, had to say something you didn't know whether it was true or not? Or you're suppose to muster up feelings, to have that joy, joy, joy, down in your heart, when you didn't have it. But you learned the plastic smile--so beautiful, so convincing. What the symbol God does is open up our little love and make it universal. To love with all of your heart, means to have a kindred sympathy for all beings; to see all beings as the children of God. It doesn't mean you can lift it up to God-like understanding, or to love with the capacity of Jesus, but to have that *kind* of love.

When I was in college, I first read Dian Fossey. She was the woman who went to live with the gorillas. And what struck me when reading her was that human kind had tried to understand gorillas for thousands of years, and we had no idea. People scientifically studied gorillas, but they had never lived with them. They had never listened to them. They had never learned from them. And so we had a complete false idea of what a gorilla is. They are not meat eaters. They are not these vicious killers. They are only that way when we treat them the way that we were treating them. Put them in a lab. Corner them. Stare at them. Take them out of their environment, separate them from their children. And, YEAH, they get a little testy. Even science without love goes astray. Ethics, even the best ethics, without love, without compassion, goes astray. When you look at the early writings of Marx, there is a concern for the poor and the weak. When you read the writings of Stalin, you have a lot of the same words, but the love is gone, the compassion is gone. And what turned out to be this cause, this very righteous cause, went completely astray. Politics goes astray, science goes astray, and bottom line is life doesn't feel like living when your heart is dead. When you are trying to live through somebody else's heart--if the church is giving you a heart transplant, what's beating there isn't yours--this text calls you back to your own heart.

Then it says to love with all your mind. Now I'm having to play with the words here, because the word in Hebrew that's translated *heart* really means *mind*. People thought with their heart. They had a different biology back then. They didn't know what this was up here (points to head). I mean even the Egyptians

when they would mummify would take that out. That was just seen as kind of padding maybe (laughter). But they were talking about how you experience life, and you feel it from here (points to heart) you feel the center of your being here, so that's where the thinking, the personality took place. And then the feeling might be the spirit, it's in your nesh, in your blood. The spirit of the blood, the spirit of the breath, and in all of your strength. But to love with all your mind, I believe you have to start with honesty. We from the very beginning, by teaching children the catechisms, if we are not very careful, we replace their thinking capacity with verbiage, with hypothetical assertions about reality, that give them no orientation that this loving text calls them to as a gift. So if you don't know anything else, if you don't know what's true, you at least know when you are being honest. And so jettison that religion which makes you dishonest. And trust, trust the loving creator, whatever that is... a person, a process, you don't know. Trust that when you're honest that will lead you to God. What kind of a God would punish you for honesty? Do you really want to spend eternity with someone who is going to burn and scald people for asking too many questions? You're going to blow it anyway. If God's like that, you're going to get kicked out anyway, right? If God is not love, why do you want to spend eternity with the vicious, vengeful person that's often described in the church? Whatever love is, that's where we want to go, right? So, it's been said that it is important to test your ideas because love requires that kind of honesty.

I love Voltaire's statement that those who believe in any absurdity can commit any atrocity. And one of the things you see around the world is really good people who have really bad ideas. And they do vicious things. We do vicious things. So to love with all your mind, see I'm pointing to the heart, to love with all of your mind means to test your thoughts from all angles, to seek out the widest context. To not think within Christianity. Do not think within America. Think universally. Test yourself from all different angles. And that will move you closer to whatever the common parent of us is. Somebody once said that the model of evil in our time is no longer really vicious, it's sheep with machine guns. It's people who will go on somebody else's word and hurt somebody else on the other side of the world just because they've not been taught to question.

So, second thing is to love with all of our mind, and to love with all of our strength. You may not feel permission to do this. I've never seen any kind of punishment like that is visited on women for being assertive in this culture. It's the same kind of destructive, demonic force that goes against men that try to be gentle. But you are invited to your strength in this passage. In a sense you are commanded to live out of your strength. That everyone is called to be prophetic. Everyone is called to be courageous. And to love with all of your strength means to seek your own happiness and the happiness of all. When I went to college, I was trying to be good. And I took up fasting; I took up all these strange spiritual exercises [to honor] Ignatius, because I knew it had to hurt. If it's going to make me good it had to hurt. And I was just getting meaner and meaner, and more and more irritable. What I discovered is, if you seek goodness, that will never lead you to love. But if you seek love, that will lead you to goodness. Because loving requires incredible discipline. So just as love demands truth and beauty, it demands goodness. Courageous, prophetic goodness.

When Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment, he broke that box. He gave a Jewish scripture, and it said "Hear, O Israel" that's the people of God, all the people of God, not just one country, not just one religion, whoever listens and responds are the chosen people. "Hear, O Israel, God is one." which means there is one world that we have to share, and every being you meet is the child of that unity. And loving that oneness means seeing every being as your family. To love with all of your mind means to test your ideas, to have the courage to be honest, and to see where that leads you, and to test your thoughts from every context you possibly can. To love with your heart means to feel what you really feel, and have the courage to be tender and gentle. To love with all of your strength means to seek out your own happiness and to work for the happiness of all beings. Without that kind of love the Bible is the most dangerous book in the world, although there is competition. The church is just a street gang in velvet

clothes and big hats, without love. So when Jesus was asked, he said go to this, and it says write it on your arm, write it on your forehead, write it on your porch, think about it when you go to sleep, look at it again when you wake up. God is one, beyond any partial understanding. It's the common life. And you are to love that with all of your heart, and all of your mind, and all of your strength.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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We are a More Light congregation. (www.mlp.org)

We are an affiliate of The Center for Progressive Christianity. (www.tcpc.org)

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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