

What Is Most Important: Prodigal Love

Luke 7:36-50

Luke 15:11-24

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March 5, 2017

Long before there was Twitter to restrict a person's communication to 140 characters at a time, there were preachers who somehow thought it would be effective to put short, pithy messages on their church signs. I'm sure that the intent is to catch someone's attention and pique their interest enough to make them want to come visit the church on Sunday. Now, that's not really my style, but I have to admit that some of the things that have appeared on church signs have caught my attention, sometimes to the point that I can't get it out of my head.

The reason I say this is because last week a phrase popped into my head, and I'm sure it's one of those catchy phrases that I've seen on a church sign: Make the Main Thing the Main Thing.

Make the main thing the main thing. It's a call to recognize what is most important, and then to focus our efforts, imagination, and energies on doing what is most important.

During this season of Lent, I would like for us to take time to recalibrate our hearts to what is most important. When a Bible scholar came up to Jesus, he asked Jesus, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" It was a question the answer to which would indicate where Jesus' priorities are, and what motivates Jesus in his life and ministry. What is most important?

Jesus tells the Bible scholar – and us as well, as we read through the gospels – what is most important. "The most important [commandment]" said Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."¹

Loving God with all our being, and loving our neighbor – that is what is most important. What's most important, then, is love. Just as the two great commands were the central creed that defined everything that Jesus said and did, so is the love of God and neighbor to be that which defines us as Christians and as Christ's church.

Loving God and loving neighbor. The Christian faith isn't about getting our ticket to heaven stamped, our room reserved in Our Father's House. The Christian faith is about loving God with all our being and loving everyone else in the world to the same extent that we love ourselves.

"Jesus did not come merely to enable specific individuals to develop a solo

¹ Mark 12:29-31

relationship with God, to run about on earth knowing that [we], surrounded by a bunch of bunglers, were the only ones getting it right. No, Jesus came to collect individuals [together], set [us] in the middle of the world and ask [us] to live out [what is most important].”²

The premise for our reflecting on what is most important is this: If we live out what is most important, both as individuals and as a church, then you and I will be personally transformed, and we will as a church (both local congregation as well as the global body of Christ) transform the world around us. We cannot focus our lives on what Jesus declares to be most important and remain unchanged. When what shaped Jesus' life and teaching and ministry also shapes our lives, then we will discover the truth in what the apostle Paul says, “Whoever is in Christ is a new creation—the old has gone, and the new has come!”³

And so, let us explore what is most important, beginning with the most important of the most important: Loving God with all our being.

The commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. But can love be commanded, as if God can simply summon the love out of us by telling us to love him? On some level, I'm sure love can be commanded; otherwise, why would God command us to love him? But at the same time, love – real love – is an act of the will flowing from the heart. I suspect that the force of the command isn't so much on the word “love,” as it is on the extent to which our love for God is to be all-encompassing. Love God like no one or nothing else. Love God, not partly, but completely.

I'm also convinced of this: That the only way we will ever be able to be faithful to the command to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is to first realize the magnitude of the love that God has shown to us. We will only be able to love God wholly and completely when we realize just how wholly and completely and eternally and faithfully God has love us.

You need look no farther than the story of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet at Simon the Pharisee's house. As a Pharisee, Simon is a self-righteous man who has, in all probability, done a good job of obeying the law of God. He really doesn't think there is much, if anything at all, that he has done wrong. The woman, on the other hand, has a pretty bad reputation around town. She is – GASP! – a SINNER.

Now, enter Jesus. Jesus is the incarnation of the living God. His mission is twofold: to show us who God is and how much God loves us; and to show us how to love God and love others. Simon the Pharisee is oblivious to Jesus' love, and so he treats Jesus as a mere curiosity, an inconvenience even. The woman, though, tells a completely different story. She recognizes the loving forgiveness and the invitation to fellowship that God extends to her through Jesus of Nazareth. She is blown away that the “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might” treats her not with disdain or condemnation, but with love and welcome.

² Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* - 10th Anniversary Edition (Paraclete Press, Kindle Edition, 2015), Kindle locations 1588-1591.

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17

The woman sees in Jesus the kind of love of which Jesus tells in the story we know as the story of the Prodigal Son.

I've often struggled with the characterization of that parable as being about a prodigal son, because the dictionary definition of prodigal isn't so much on negative wastefulness as it is on extravagance shown to someone else. The dictionary definition of "prodigal" is this: "wastefully or recklessly extravagant; giving or using profusely, lavish; lavishly abundant, profuse."⁴ While it is true that the son in the parable is wasteful, I like the NIV's characterization of the parable as "The Lost Son," because I think the word "prodigal" is better put to use to describe the love of the father toward the lost son.

Think of the profuse love the father shows to the son: He runs out to embrace his son even before his son has a chance to say a word; he clothes the son with the best robe and fresh sandals—covering his dirtiness and shame; he puts the family ring on the son's finger, restoring him into full privilege of the family; he rejoices at the return of his lost son, killing the fatted calf reserved for only the most festive of celebrations.

The love of the father is also evident in what he doesn't do. He doesn't lay down conditions that the son has to meet to return; the son simply needs to be wanting to come home. He doesn't berate the son for being so wasteful. He doesn't say "I told you so." He doesn't even accept his son's offer to return at a lesser status.

That is what prodigal love looks like. It looks like grace. It looks like a God who pursues us and embraces us the moment we turn to him. It looks like a God who is more interested in rejoicing that his family is back together than he is in scolding us for doubting that his way is the best (really, the only) way.

That's what prodigal love looks like.

I suspect that's what the woman found in Jesus. She saw and experienced the prodigal love of God—a love so lavish and profuse and extravagant that it defies quantifying. "As high as the heavens are above the earth—that's how much God love those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west – that's how far God has removed our transgressions from us."⁵

And because she discovered that she was loved with a prodigal love, she loved her Lord with a prodigal love. It is when this woman realized the magnitude of the love that God had shown to her in Jesus that she could begin to fulfill the command to love the Lord with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength.

The jar of perfume that she broke and poured over Jesus' feet wasn't your dime store generic perfume. It was probably worth a whole year's wages. And she broke it and poured it on Jesus' feet, as a sign of her devotion to him. She was shameless in her tears. She didn't care how everyone else thought of her, loving Jesus was all that mattered.

Prodigally loved by her Lord, she loved her Lord prodigally in return.

4 Dictionary.com

5 Psalm 103:11-12

You can't command love, but you can summon love with love. We can love God with all our being because God summons our love for him with his love for us.

Love begets love.

Last Sunday about 60 or 70 people from all around the community, ranging from toddlers to 80-year-olds, gathered at 8 Oaks Park on Andrews Highway, to put the finishing touches on the Kim M. Jordan Memorial Playground. There was a great article about it in the Georgetown Times last Wednesday. The playground was truly a community effort, spearheaded by the Georgetown Baseball / Softball Boosters, and led by Jessica and Craig Sasser.

To a person, everyone who gathered at the playground last Sunday did so because they (we) loved Kim Jordan. If you were to ask any of us why we loved Kim, you would hear some variation of the same answer: Because Kim loved us. She loved everybody.

Love begets love.

Folks, that's the way it is with the command to love God. We can love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength for no other reason than that God has first loved us.

I mentioned it on Wednesday, but it bears repeating here today. As we reflect on the the implications of living into what is most important, I would encourage you to get a copy of the book The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others, by Scot McKnight. You can go online to Amazon.com, or other booksellers like Christianbook.com and order one. Or if you let me know today, I can order one for you. They're about \$14 for the book, or \$10 if you get it in Kindle format for your iPad or tablet.

That which is most important will only take root in our lives if we inscribe it on our heart. To that affect, I would encourage you to take the insert in your bulletin home with you. Commit the words to memory, tape the sheet on your mirror or on your refrigerator. And say the words when you wake up, and when you go to sleep, and throughout the day. Let the words serve as the center of your thoughts, the wellspring of your actions.

What is most important? Love God, that's what is most important. Love God, because God first loved you. Love God with a prodigal love, because that's how God has loved you. Amen.