

**Rev. George Arceneaux**

**10/29/2023**

**Pentecost 22**

Today's the day we hear what is to my mind, the most important word Jesus gives in the entirety of the Gospel. The great commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

If you have ever wanted to take away one thing from Christianity, if there is one thing that should be conveyed in every sermon you hear, in every program of the church, in every work we do, it is that we are commanded to love God, love others, and love ourselves, and that all three in integrally intertwined with one another.

And before I get into the joy of why this is so important, even beyond Jesus saying this is the most important commandment, even beyond the sometimes brutally difficult work that it is to love, I want to repeat, with immense gravity. For this moment, set aside whatever opinions you have, set aside partisanship and ideology, even belief, and enter that space you may not have visited since you were a child when your parents would say don't ask why, do what I say. Hear, with me, this word: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

For all the wars, and hurts, and problems, and furies and sin of our world, listen to these words, because they are the heart beat of our faith.

Now... why the heck does this matter? There's this idea that God is perfect, that Jesus was perfect, and so WE should be perfect. There's a standard that has been perpetuated by the church and subsequently western society that has so often been untenable. Standards that lead to religious trauma and Catholic guilt, yet also standards which can feel integral to live up to.

But the thing is.... I don't know that this notion of perfection that is held by so many Christians, including myself to a degree is really helpful. How many of us know the rebukes that our faith has endured, about its being unrealistic, thieving of other religions, and colonialist. How many of us have heard that its foolish to believe in Christianity because our scriptures are conflicting and contradictory, that the laws and stories are too outdated, too brutal, too ugly in many places to apply to a more enlightened ideal that our modern age needs to strive for.

For so many critics of our faith, Christian and non-Christian alike, they ask how on earth can you call scripture or even our God perfect?

And at least for the latter... we do. Our prayers, our collects, our traditions, we say that God is perfect not infrequently.

And you what? I think God is. Eat it haters. But perfection in Christianity is, to my mind, not what has been so historically lauded. Perfection is not about following the laws to the T and using them to hurt others. Perfection is also not a place where we don't hurt others because of mistakes and shortcomings, or in turn are hurt. Perfection, the way the God is perfect, is following that call to love always. And while we may fail; while we may think ourselves better than others or think less than of others or any other number of ways in which we sin against our neighbors, God always loves us. And lives into the messiness of relationship.

The things about scripture, about our stories, is that they look an awful lot like us. Like people. Like we live lives where we both hurt and help, where we believe things that may have helped us survive or love in the past but no longer.

Scripture and the laws and lessons we learn from it are not static and are not consistent, because that isn't life and that isn't love.

Life with others is about getting to know one another and that means meeting the unexpected! Like, my parents, God bless them, have always loved me even when they didn't expect what that meant. How many of y'all know nothing about Dungeons and Dragons? That's exactly where my parents were when I got way into it in college. And for Christmas, as a present to me, they gave me a HUGE 8 foot wizard staff. I had zero use for that thing, did not need it for Dungeons and Dragons. But you know what? I have rarely felt so loved in all my life.

The perfection of God isn't the perfection of an 800 credit score or making enough money to afford a home or never getting divorced or any number of other metrics that we may levy to deny what is perfect about our God. That no matter what, there is nothing that can separate you from God's love.

Everything we do, every law mandated in scripture or otherwise must measure to that perfect criteria, the law that is not a burden but a light yoke: that we love ourselves as we love our neighbor and that we love God.

And I'll never tire of saying this; when you follow that law, this is what you get. People of all ages seated together dressed up in costume or not, of all different understandings of God and different backgrounds. Not without problems; not without addictions or brokenness or proclivity or rage or self hatred or sin. And we're here together. And this, all of this, all of us, this is what love looks like. The vision of the great commandment realized. And I don't know about you... but I love it. Amen.