

WITH ALL YOUR HEART
Deuteronomy 6:1-9

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 18, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.

Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

*Hear, O Israel:
The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.*

*You shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your might.*

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

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Liturgically, today is the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost. But

- Given the encouraging COVID numbers of the last few weeks
- The over 600 people we had in worship last week (about two thirds in person; one third on-line)
- The fact that the rain did not deter our love of Bar-B-Q
- And given that we have over fifty youth registered for our opening Youth Fellowship Pool Party tonight

I’d like to rename today “The Second Sunday after COVID.” It has proved to be a terrific homecoming.

If returning to the fullness of church activities is something like Spring Training in baseball, I want to preach today and next Sunday on a combined text that lies at the heart of Christian faith, just like running bases and fielding grounders is central to even the most seasoned veterans of the major leagues. I want to preach on the Great Commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God
with *all* your heart,
and with *all* your soul,
and with *all* your mind.

And

You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

I.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, a religious official, deeply attached to the way of life among the Jewish people known as the Law (or Torah, which means “instruction, direction”¹), approaches Jesus with a question:

Teacher, which commandment in the law is the *greatest*?

Depending on which Gospel we are reading, a different degree of confrontation that lies behind the question.² But the answer Jesus provides is the same:

You shall love the Lord your God
with *all* your heart,
and with *all* your soul,
and with *all* your mind.

And:

You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

On these two commandments [Jesus concludes] hang all the law and the prophets, [all the Scripture].

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Jesus did not craft these two commandments out of his own creative originality – that gift was more apparent in the parables he wove and his pithy responses to thorny questions. Nor did Jesus receive these commandments simply because he was the unique Son of God. In fact, he was not the first person to receive them.

Rather, it was initiated a chapter earlier³ by God to Moses for delivery to the people of Israel following their release from slavery in Egypt⁴ and in preparation for their entrance into the Land that God had promised to

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), Deuteronomy 4:44-5:5n.

² In Matthew 22:35-40, the Pharisee asks Jesus the question “to test him”; this appears less so concerning the scribe who asks the question in Mark 12:28-34; and in Luke 10:25-37, the lawyer wants to “test” Jesus, and hearing his answer, to “justify himself” with the follow up question, “Who is my neighbor?”, prompting Jesus to give The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

³ Deuteronomy 5:31.

⁴ Exodus 12-15.

Abraham and Sarah several hundred years earlier.⁵ The first part of the Great Commandment appears in Deuteronomy; the second, which we shall see next week, in Leviticus.⁶

These two commandments would serve as the *hallmarks* of the people of Israel for the remainder of the Old Testament; and they would assume an equally central role in the New Testament when Jesus combined the two commandments into one.

So, let's look at the first part of the Great Commandment today.

II.

It is worth beginning with a vocabulary lesson. We need to know what the words *heart*, *soul*, and *mind* meant to the Jewish listeners to which Moses spoke, and how they translate for us.

- Then as now, the word *heart* refers to the *center* of who we are, that around which everything else turns. To love God with all our heart is to love God with *our whole selves*.

Then as now, the word *heart* also designates the place where human emotions are thought to reside. The heart is where we attribute feelings of joy and sorrow; love and hate; hope and fear. We don't sing: "I've got love, love, love, love down in my kidneys" (though some cultures do). We sing: "I've got love, love, love, love down in my *heart*."

- The second word in our vocabulary lesson today is *soul*. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul." Soul is the essence of who we are, our being, the force that gives us life. The Hebrew word is *nefesh*. *Nefesh* goes all the way back to Genesis 2:7:

Then the Lord God formed a man [*Adam*] from he the ground [*Adamah*], and breathed into his nostrils *the breath of life*; and the man became *a living being, nefesh, soul*.

I want to follow the advice of others⁷ and translate "soul" as "being." When we love God with all our "soul," we love God with all our "being."

- And *mind* is sometimes translated "might" or "strength." It refers to our human capacity, which varies at different stages of our life. We can do less when we are children than we can do in the prime of life; the same is true of aging. Health and physical condition also play large roles in our capacity. But the Commandment enjoins us to "love God" with "all of our capacity" – with whatever our capacity is – at a given period in our life.

Thus, the translation I prefer for this first half of the Greatest Commandment is:

You shall love the Lord your God
with all your *heart*,
with all your *being*,
and with all your *capacity*.

⁵ Genesis 12:1-4.

⁶ Today's passage – Deuteronomy 6:1-9 – and next week's passage – Leviticus 19:1-18.

⁷ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 912n5.

Finally, prior to this point in the Bible, the word *love* had only been used to describe the relationship between two people or to describe God's commitment to the people of Israel. Prior to this in the Biblical narrative, men and women were called to *fear* God, to honor God, to *worship* God.⁸ But poised to enter the Promised Land, they are called – for the first time in the Bible – to *love* God.⁹

III.

So in this Spring Training of renewed church life, these are the vocabulary words we use: *love, heart, being, capacity*. But there is another important word that appears before each of these aspects with which we love God. That word is *all*. We are to *love* God with

All our heart.
All our being.
All our capacity.

I am told that the way the word *heart* is written in Hebrew in this verse, it is essentially “doubled.” Instead of “*l-e-v*” in Hebrew, it is spelled “*l-e-v-a-v*.” As if to say, “heart, heart.”

One of my favorite Jewish scholars, Avivah Zornberg, indicates that the heart was considered to have two sides, each side housing a different set of inclinations: one side housing inclinations like love, beauty, truth; the other, inclinations like anger, hurt, grief, hatred, revenge. Zornberg says that we cannot fully *love* God unless we love God *with all that is beautiful in our hearts, and with all that is painful, all that is positive, and all that is less so*. We love God with all our heart: *lev/levav*; heart/heart.¹⁰

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This may strike us as counterintuitive, for most of us are inclined to love God with the *goodness* that lies within us and leave it at that. But in such love, we are only engaging a part of our heart, a part of our being, a part of our capacity. For in addition to things which are beautiful, our hearts contain:

- Things we have done that are not beautiful
- Things done to us that are not beautiful
- Experiences we have had that are painful, shameful, degrading.

Locked away in a chamber in nearly all our hearts, sealed tightly, are experiences many of us have that we never want to revisit, to face, to talk about, with God or anyone else.

⁸ Alter 912n4, 912n5.

⁹ This command to *love* God follows one of the strongest claims God has yet made to be the *sole* God in all of creation, uniquely worthy of worship: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.” This call is a resounding affirmation of Israel's monotheism. Over against other understandings of gods in the culture around them, the Israelites were called to affirm that there is absolutely no God other than the God they worshipped: Not a God of fire, or sun or wind or rain, or day or night, or harvest or seedtime, or fertility or war. God alone is one: God is Who we love with our hearts, our being, our capacity. Who else would there be to love? In addition, twice a day the Jewish people grew to proclaim the Shema (“Hear...”) in which the command of love appeared. (Alter 912n4).

¹⁰ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Hidden Order of Intimacy: Reflections on the Book of Leviticus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2022), 205. She attributes this insight to the Midrashic scholars Rashi and B. Brachot 54a. See footnote 57 on page 261.

But to love God *with all our heart* is to *lift to* God even the evil, the painful, the shameful. Loving God *with all our heart* involves turning over to God *everything* that resides in our hearts, especially those things locked away in its most tightly-sealed caverns.

IV.

But the good news is such unlocking is possible. We *can* love God with *all* our heart, *both* the beauty *and* the pain that reside within it.

In a letter to a friend, Kafka once wrote: “A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.”¹¹ I might paraphrase and say that “Words must be the axe that cuts through the iciness that has formed in our hearts.” Words can open the parts of our heart which we have sealed. They can crack open the ice we have allowed to form. Our hearts can begin to crack open, to melt, even to burst forth when we hear

- The words of a Biblical passage read by a child in church.
- The words of a hymn or a psalm or a lament or a prayer or a proverb or an anthem that grabs us in the pew, lifts and shakes us.
- The words in a novel or short story, an opinion piece or a political oration, a play or movie.

We can hear the invitation to open our hearts and love God with all that is within them through:

- Words of a remembrance spoken at a memorial service.
- Words of a friend spoken at a meal, on a walk through the woods, in a handwritten card, an email, even a text or a tweet.

The unsealing of our hearts, the axe breaking through the ice, is not limited to words we *hear*; these can also occur through words we *speak*:

- Words we say in a confessional booth or whisper in the period of silence following our Prayer of Confession
- Words we speak to the people closest to us:
 - in the car with our parent or teenager.
 - in a walk with the one friend with whom we can “think aloud.”¹²
 - lying in bed with our beloved, watching the shadows of the ceiling fan flicker above as we share the most honest conversation we have shared in years.

¹¹ “Letter to Oscar Pollak,” dated January 27, 1904, quoted in Zornberg 196.

¹² I was long ago told that this Emerson’s definition of a friend is “one before whom I may think aloud.” Source unknown.

My friends,
When we are able to *hear* or speak with
Another human being,
Or God,
Or God through another human being,
The unsealing of our heart that follows
Goes a long way
Toward enabling us
To love God
With *all* our heart,
With *all* our being,
With *all* our capacity.

And what a love such love is.

Amen.