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## *Love, with Heart, Soul, and Mind*

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**Proper 25A - in the Revised Common Lectionary**

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

You all remember the story of the young fool, who wanted the Bible to tell him what to do. "It's all the Word of God," he cried out, "I'll just turn to any page in the Bible and do what it says!" The first verse he turned to was this one: "Judas went out and hanged himself."

"Wait a minute! This could not be right. I'll try again." He opened the book and let the pages fall again. It said, "Go thou and do likewise."

"No!" He tried a third time. This time, the Bible, the holy Word of God opened to "What you must do, do quickly."

The Bible does not come out well when it is interpreted by folks who do not use their heads. Like someone once said (including William Sloane Coffin), "The Bible is something like a mirror. If an ass looks in, you cannot expect an apostle to look out."

Ah! Our interpretations can lead to glorious life and freedom, and they can lead to oppression and mindless literalism. Yes, do believe the Bible; but use your head! In our time, mindless literalism has led to some ridiculous conclusions. A simplistic literalism leads to legalism and then to the full-blown systems of legalistic fundamentalism.

Unfortunately, the gospel of Christianity is under attack from literalists all the time, many of them in our own churches. Our detractors ask questions designed to entrap, to trip up, to test.

They ask questions just like the Sadducees and Pharisees asked of Jesus. Yes, Jesus himself encountered such severe legalistic opposition. Note all the testing questions in Matthew 22. Is it lawful to pay taxes or not? Will there be re-marriage in heaven?

And now this one: Which is the greatest commandment in the law? No matter what Jesus says, the Pharisees plan to accuse him of omitting something important. It is no wonder that in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Matthew, Jesus has had enough of this foolishness. He explodes in anger at the Pharisees and accuses them of being blind guides; they strain out a gnat and swallow a camel. (Jesus can be pretty good with a comeback).

The gospel will always have such detractors, detractors who urge us to follow Scripture but who then claim that we have not followed their particular verse of Scripture. Or detractors who are simply unable to experience what Scripture ultimately points us to: the incredible love of God. In fact, it is the lack of love which is the main detraction from the gospel, and from the scripture as well. The gospels= detractors are those who do not love.

That is why this particular episode in Jesus' ministry, Matthew 22, is so wonderful. Jesus answers the Pharisees question:

what is the greatest commandment? And he does so in two ways: by re-interpreting scripture, and by giving the answer of love.

Listen to Jesus answer. First of all, by answering the Pharisees, Jesus acknowledges that there are some pieces of Scripture that are greater than others. Some verses are more authoritative than others!

He quotes Deuteronomy 6.4. Jesus finds there an overall principle of Scripture, which remains the same when other particulars change. There are overall principles of Scripture, about the movement from death to life in the kingdom of God, about death and resurrection, principles about what it means to love God. The disciplines, the expectations, the cultures, change; but the principles of love and life do not change.

When Jesus does quote Scripture, he often leaves out part of the verse; he even changes some of the words. Luke 4, which is Jesus' announcement of his mission, is only a partial citation of Isaiah 61; it leaves out the violent parts! Matthew 5 says directly, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', but I say to you turn the other cheek." This is literally different from the former law. Jesus was re-interpreting the Old Testament law. Jesus is using his head, and he is also using his heart!

So, when Jesus is asked, "Which is the greatest commandment?", he did not reply something like: "whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death," even though that is certainly scriptural. Rather he searched, with all his heart and soul and mind, for that commandment which summed up the theme of all the rest --that commandment which all the rest were designed to support.

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

Ah, yes, a direct quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5, the Shema of Israel, that which every good Jew recited daily in prayer: Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord: and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

But, wait a second! Is that the same quotation which Jesus used? Deuteronomy 6 says "love God...with all your might." Jesus said, "love God...with all your mind." Something has changed. Maybe the gospel writer Matthew got it wrong; but checking Luke and Mark's version of this episode, they, too, have Jesus saying "with all your mind," rather than "with all your might."

What's the difference? On one level, there's not much difference; we are to love God with all that we are. But to say specifically, "love God...with all your mind" means something in particular. It means use your head; figure it out. Loving God requires some thinking. Love is more than just sentiment, religious feeling, good will (though those, too, are good).

Good love involves good thinking, and thinking can be difficult and scary. It might even point us to contradiction and paradox. We might even notice them in Scripture. And it is a good thing to notice paradoxes in scripture. We know then that we are on the right track, for paradox is especially the enemy of fundamentalism, which wants all truth to be rigid and consistent and narrow. Paradox opens the way to mystery, and mystery is the enemy of fundamentalism.

So it is that Jesus poses a paradox to his accusers. "If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" That paradoxical question silences his attackers.

Paradox is also the stuff of creativity. It was the great 19th century Dane, Soren Kierkegaard who said, "The thinker who is devoid of paradox is like the lover who is devoid of passion."

Jesus knew how to love, and he knew how to think. He said, "Love God with your mind." His very statement is a re-interpretation of Deuteronomy 6. It is not an exact quotation, delivered mindlessly and blindly. Jesus was not a fundamentalist, not a simplistic legalist, not a shallow thinker.

Jesus thus gives the answer to rigid and simplistic interpreters of Scripture. Find your heart, find your soul, find your mind.

Then use them to love God and neighbor. Jesus is able to transform a lawyer's meticulous testing into an all-encompassing love command of God.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and prophets."

If we are looking for simplicity in our Christian theology, here it is, summed up in power and authority:

"Love God: love your neighbor."

It is simple, but it is not simple-minded. Find your heart, your soul, your mind. Find yourself! If I do not know myself well, if I am unable to know what is really good for me, then I cannot know what is truly good and valuable for my neighbor either. I cannot love my neighbor as myself, when I do not know how to love myself well.

Good love requires good thinking. It requires good heart and good soul. Love God; love your neighbor.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip