Through the written word and the spoken word, God help us to hear your Living Word, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

LOVE. BECAUSE GOD. Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18; Matthew 22:34-46

There are 613 commandments given to the Jewish people. 613. And the Pharisees test Jesus by asking which is the greatest. Which of these 613 commandments is most important? The question they might really be asking is which commandments Jesus is willing to ignore? And Matthew is sure to note that the Pharisees are not asking this out of a desire to learn and have their faith deepened. They are asking in an attempt to entrap Jesus.

The Pharisees are trying to be sneaky, and yet Jesus will always be sneakier and more clever. I guess that comes with the territory of being fully divine.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Here Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy and referencing the Shema, an essential prayer and statement of faith of the Jewish people. Jesus is saying that the greatest commandment is to love God with the absolute fullness of who you are. Love God with every fiber of your being.

The second-- You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Now Jesus quotes from Leviticus, the same section we heard this morning. In Leviticus the message Moses relays is “you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” The combination of this commandment with “I am the Lord” within the same sentences reads to me like “love your neighbor because I am God.”

Love. Because God. Love. Because God.

Full stop. God loves so we are called to love. We are called to love God with our fullest self and to love every person as we ourselves should be loved. There are three layers in these two commandments. Love God. Love neighbor. Love self. On those, hang everything else.

The kind of love Jesus is talking about is a love that informs all else. A sort of love that gives context to the other 600 commandments. The kind of love that inspires us to follow God in a host of other ways. It’s a love that changes us.

When we truly love God with the fullness of who we are and we commit to loving our neighbors as ourselves, which again means we must love ourselves, when we do this we are changed and transformed. We grow and expand through love.

Each year on one Sunday of summer camp, my camp director Casey would always share a sermon on the Corners of Love. I want to share her illustration with you because it is simple yet profound and comes to me often as a reminder of how we grow by sharing love.

CORNERS OF LOVE

**2**

**1**

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When we give away a corner of love, we go from 4 corners to 5 corners and we get to offer 3 corners to another. Love changes us, it expands us.

**3**

**5**

**4**

**3**

**4**

**3**

When I think on this image and on Jesus’ response to the test from the Pharisees, I see how beautiful and brilliant Jesus’ answer is. Jesus can confidently name that the greatest commandments are to love God with heart, soul, and mind and to love neighbor as self because those two commandments alter our ways of being. When we live those commandments we are oriented to the law of God in so many ways. We are ready to listen to God’s word, because we love God and we trust God. We are willing to be challenged to follow the hard teachings of Jesus that show us concretely what love, forgiveness, generosity, and healing look like.

Here at St. Columba’s we name that we are on a mission to live God’s love. We live the love that comes from God and we live our love *of* God. Now in our stewardship season, we pay special attention to the resources we need in order to live our mission. We hear a call and I pray we are moved by the Spirit to do our part.

When I think about how to live into the Corners of Love image, I am reminded that in stewardship of all kinds, I am invited to love. To love fully and generously. I get the chance to share a corner of love! When we think about financial stewardship, sometimes we feel that cut of the corner and feel a pinch. And we are changed through that. Something in our Spirit is altered. When we dig deep into generous love, we grow and expand in our faith. Stewardship is a practice of faith. Yes, it’s about paying the bills and affording to follow our mission, but it is also a spiritual practice of giving back to God, of letting go, and of trusting.

As with any spiritual practice or exercise, it can grow and stretch over time. If you practice centering prayer starting for 2 minutes, once that feels doable you might try 5 or 10 or more. With that extra time, the full benefit of quiet, still prayer washes over you. That stretch and expansion applies to our spiritual practice of stewardship too. If giving financially is new for you, find that corner of love, that bit of your finances that you can give and see how you are moved and changed by that gift. If you have been at this for a while and maybe giving at the same level for a while, find that place of stretching. See how you might be changed by feeling that slight pinch. Generosity changes us and expands us.

Jesus says Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. On these hang all the law and the prophets. On these hang every little thing we do in life. On these commandments rest our financial stewardship, our care of creation, our work for racial justice and commitments to anti-racism, our care for community through Water Ministry and Wednesday Night Suppers, our desire to learn and deepen our faith in Bible Study or small groups, our commitment to serve in worship, our desire to raise up kids in the faith through Sunday School, even our little acts of kindness on the bus or in the grocery story. Everything we do rests on these commandments to love.

May we be changed by love. May we expand and grow through love. And may we always find a corner of love to share. AMEN.