

All You Need Is Love
Matthew 22:34-40

All you need is love. That's what John Lennon wrote in 1967, and the Beatles broadcast it as part of the BBC's "Our World" satellite television event, featuring artists giving live performances all around the globe. Between 400 and 700 million people tuned in, and the song instantly became an anthem for those who opposed the Vietnam War.

And Jesus' words in today's passage, words which were first spoken some 2000 years ago, would seem to reinforce that notion, right? All you need to do is to love God and to love other people – Jesus said that's the essence of the Law of Moses, who in turn wrote some 1400 years before Jesus was born. So, were Moses and Jesus really just flower children, born before their time? Were the hippies right when they sang, "All you need is love?"

Well, what did the hippies mean when they spoke of love? Many of them practiced what they called "free love," sharing physical intimacy with many different people without worrying about technicalities like marriage. And many other cultural icons of the late 1960's wholeheartedly agreed: "It's knowing I'm not shackled by forgotten words and bonds and the ink stains that have dried upon some lines, that keeps you in the back roads By the rivers of my memory and keeps you ever gentle on my mind." Isn't that what Glen Campbell sang on the country radio stations in 1968? Who needs written marriage licenses? Who needs marriage bonds? All you need is love, right?

So, should we be surprised that American culture has turned out the way it has? Should we be surprised that marriages have become so fragile? After all, if emotions are all that's important in human relationships, then when you've lost that lovin' feeling, aren't there fifty ways to leave your lover – even if breaking up is hard to do?

More seriously, should we be surprised at those who more recently have wanted to redefine marriage? After all, if marriages only depend on lovin' feelings and if marriages are as changeable as the feelings on which they are based, then why shouldn't two men or two women get married if they feel like it? If all you need is love, what's wrong with that?

No, we Evangelical Presbyterians don't want to believe that the teachings of Moses and Jesus could possibly have led to the ruin of the American family, and all the social and economic chaos that has come along with it. But if Moses and Jesus were right about the supreme importance of love, where did our culture make a wrong turn?

Well, it might surprise you to know that it wasn't the hippies' fault. No, ever since the Romantic movement swept through Western music and literature in the mid nineteenth century – a movement pioneered by Beethoven, who wrote the stirring music to our opening hymn – most people have taken for granted that the emotion we call love is the most powerful, the most moving, the most important force known to man. Since that time, even most Christians have defined the word "love" in an almost exclusively emotional way. We have, in short, confused the term "love" with the term "affection."

Okay, so does that mean we need to ditch Valentine's Day and reject romantic love altogether? Must we revert to the stoicism that was so prevalent in society before the hippies and their Romantic ancestors? Should we just forget all about our feelings and grit our teeth and bear down and joylessly

fulfill the responsibilities of our relationships? Is that somehow what love for God and other people really means?

Not at all. For remember, Jesus was talking in these verses to the Pharisees, those hardcore legalists who believed that following the Law of Moses down to the letter was the only thing that really matters in life. It was to them that Jesus made His audacious claim: being in a right relationship with God means more than following a list of do's and don'ts – it means we must love God. God is thus not satisfied with mere religion, following sets of regulations or doing good works or performing certain ceremonies – He wants our love.

Now, such a claim would have been quite a shock, not only to the Pharisees but to the Sadducees as well. For remember, this conversation took place in the Temple, the place to which all the people of Israel had brought their animal sacrifices for 1000 years, sacrifices that were spelled out in elaborate detail in the Book of Leviticus. But on that spot, in that sacred place, Jesus insisted that love for God and love for our neighbors is so much more important than any of the sacrifices so many of them were preparing to offer. And Paul agreed with Him, in that famous chapter from I Corinthians that we read responsively this morning. No matter how orthodox our theology, no matter how great our faith, no matter how generous our gifts, Paul says that without love none of those things does any good.

And we modern Christians know that. We know that just mouthing the words of the Apostles' Creed isn't the same thing as loving God, and neither is putting money in the offering plate, or doing work projects around the church. Moreover, we Southerners know all too well that it's possible to say the right thing just because it's customary. We know it's possible to do the right thing out of a sense of obligation or even guilt. We know that giving a gift isn't the same thing as giving love.

Okay, so if on the one hand love for God and for others isn't just a feeling of affection, but if on the other hand it also isn't just about giving gifts or doing good works or going through certain religious ceremonies, what is it? What exactly is Jesus telling us to do when He says that the essence of the Law of Moses is for us to love God and love other people?

Well, maybe we can get at this by looking at how Jesus tells us to love God. In verse 37, He quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5, which says that we must first love God with all our heart. Now, I know, the Romantics and their hippy descendants would instantly interpret the word "heart" in a purely emotional way. But the Hebrew word means so much more than that. The word "levav" actually refers to our heart in the way we talk about the heart of a tree or the heart of an artichoke – it points to the core of a person's inner being – not just to his feelings, but also to her mind and will, to everything that makes a person who he or she is.

And that means that while love must include desire and even passion, it doesn't stop there. No, if we are to love God with all our heart, with every part of our inmost being, such love also has to include our thoughts, our mental activity – after all Jesus also says we must love God with all our mind. Love for God must thus include the sort of thing we are trying to do right now – trying to figure out what God is saying to us, what God wants us to know and to believe and to do.

But true love goes even further than that. For loving God must also involve a decision to live out our desire for God in accordance with our understanding of God. True love must thus include a firm determination to be loyal and faithful to God no matter what happens. Loving God with all our heart

thus means that at the core of our being we must devote to God all that makes us who we are – all our emotions, all our thoughts, and all our intentions. Thus, true love must always include true commitment.

In other words, both the Romantics and the Pharisees believed only part of the truth. For true love isn't just a feeling of affection, and it also isn't just accepting a set of religious obligations. No, the only way we can love God from the center of everything that makes us ourselves is for love to be a heartfelt, informed, determined, committed relationship. And such an all-encompassing relationship must naturally be expressed in every aspect of our lives, for Moses and Jesus agree that we must love God with all our soul.

Now, we modern Americans might think that "heart and soul" is a bit repetitive, because we normally use the word "soul" to indicate the spiritual, inner part of a human being. But the Hebrew word for soul, "nephesh," is actually much more inclusive.

After all, way back in Genesis chapter 2, after God molded Adam's body from the dust of the ground, it wasn't until God breathed the breath of life into that body that Adam became a living soul, a living nephesh. The word soul thus includes all that makes up human life, body as well as spirit. To love God with all our soul thus means to love Him with all we are and all we have, with both our inward and our outward being, not just with our feelings on the one hand and not just with our thoughts and determination on the other hand, but with our actions, with what we do with our physical bodies. Love must thus be something that we put into practice, something that we demonstrate in a concrete way.

But let's press this point a little further, for remember, Moses and Jesus use the same word for our love for God that they use for our love for others. So, if we are to express true love to all those around us, that must mean that we are to be in the same sort of relationships with our neighbors as we are with God. That means that all of our human relationships are to be marked not only by warm affection and honest goodwill, but by a determination to put that love into practice, giving to one another all that we are and all that we have, the very best of our hearts and minds, our intentions and our actions.

And if we understand love this way, as an all-encompassing relationship, as a desire to bless the beloved regardless of the cost to the self, then what Paul says about it in our responsive reading just makes sense, doesn't it? After all, if we have determined to devote ourselves completely to the service of others, directing all our thoughts, feelings and actions toward their good, then of course we will be patient and kind even toward those who try to push us away. Of course we won't boil with jealousy, because we will be more interested in what we can give to others than in what we can get out of them. Of course we won't boast or be proud of ourselves, because our thoughts and feelings will be so focused on those whom we love that we won't think very much about ourselves at all. Of course we won't be rude or insist on getting what we want, because true love means we will only be interested in meeting others' needs or satisfying their desires. And of course we won't be provoked or think evil thoughts when everything in any relationship doesn't go our way. Because as long as our beloved is blessed, true love means we will be content.

All you need is love – that's what John Lennon said. But his sort of love slapped his girlfriend across the face when she danced with another boy, married her only after she had conceived his child,

and then divorced her so that he could take up with an avant-garde artist. Is that sort of love, a love that is as capricious as it is self-centered, really all we need?

How different is Jesus' idea of love: "Greater love has no man than this: that He lay down His life for His friends." That's the kind of love Jesus has for us. And just before He put that love into practice, just before He went to the cross for a world full of sinners who crucified Him, He said, "Love one another as I have loved you."

Yes, no matter what the Romantics or the Pharisees might think, that's the sort of love God has for us, and that's the sort of love God calls us to give to Him and to give to one another – a love that is as thoughtful as it is passionate, a love that demonstrates itself in deeds of selfless goodwill, a love that gives of itself completely, a love that holds nothing back. That sort of love, Paul tells us, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. That sort of love never fails. That sort of love sums up everything that God wants us to be and do. And that sort of love really is all we need.