

All You Need Is Love
Mark 12:28-34

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 would seem to reinforce that notion, right? All you need to do is to love God and to love other people – 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 said, "All you need is love?"

Of course, 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 tagged right along after the hippies: "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? 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? It's exactly what the hippies and the country singers wanted. 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, isn't that a good reason for breaking up? And 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 Christians recoil at the idea of Moses' and Jesus' teachings leading to the ruin of the American family. But if they were right about the supreme importance of love, where did we go wrong? 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, 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" almost exclusively in an emotional way. We have, in short, confused the term "love" with the term "affection."

Okay, so what does the word "love" really mean? More specifically, if Moses and Jesus tell us that we need to love God and to love others, what are they talking about?

Perhaps it will help if we first take another look at something else it doesn't mean. For if love for God doesn't just mean feelings of affection, the scribe's answer tells us it also doesn't just mean offering certain sacrifices. Love for God, in short, is not simply a religion, a set that of ceremonies to perform.

Now, that would be quite a shock to everyone who was listening to this discussion. 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 here is this scribe, this expert in the Law of Moses stating that love for God and love for our neighbors is so much more important than any of those sacrifices everyone around them was preparing to offer. And Jesus agreed with Him. Paul did too, in that famous chapter from I Corinthians that we read responsively this morning. No matter how generous the gift we give, Paul says that if we offer it without love it does no one any good.

No, offering animal sacrifices wasn't really the same thing as loving God, and neither is the amount we put in the offering plate, or the work projects we complete around the church. After all, we know all too well that it's possible to give a gift to someone just because it's customary or out of a sense of obligation or even guilt. Giving a gift isn't the same thing as giving love.

Okay, so if love for God and for others isn't just a feeling of affection, and if it isn't just giving gifts or going through certain religious ceremonies, what is it? What exactly is Jesus telling us to do when He tells us to love God and love others?

Well, maybe we can get at this by looking at how Jesus tells us to love God. In verse 30 He quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5, which says that we must first love God with all our heart. Now, I know, the Romantics would have us interpret the word "heart" in a purely emotional way, and that's probably our initial inclination. But the Hebrew word contains much more depth. The word "levav" actually refers to our heart 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 of his feelings, but also of his mind and his will, of everything that makes a person who he is.

And that means that while love includes passion and desire, it must not stop there. If we are to love God with every part of our inmost being, that must include our thoughts, our mental activity – after all Jesus says we must love God with all our mind, and the scribe agrees that we must love God with all our understanding. Love for God must thus include the sort of thing we are trying to do right now – trying to figure out what He is saying, what He wants us to believe and to do.

And loving God necessarily involves a decision to live according to our desire for God and according to our understanding of God. It includes a firm determination to be loyal to God no matter what happens. Loving God with all our heart thus means that at the core of our being all that makes us who we are belongs to God – all our emotions, all our thoughts, and all our intentions.

And now we are getting close to what love really means, aren't we? Love isn't just a feeling of affection, and it isn't just 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 an all-inclusive relationship.

And this relationship must be expressed in every aspect of our lives, for Moses and Jesus and the scribe all say that we must love God with all our soul. Now, we might think that "heart and soul" is a bit repetitive, because we usually use the word "soul" to indicate the spiritual, inner part of a human being. But the Hebrew word "nephesh" is actually much more inclusive. After God molded Adam from the dust of the ground, it wasn't until He breathed the breath of life into his body that Adam became a living soul, a living nephesh. The word soul thus includes all that makes up human life, body and spirit.

To love God with all our soul thus means to love Him with both our inward and our outward being, not just with our feelings and thoughts and determination, but with our actions, with what we do with our bodies. Our relationship of love must thus be something that we put into practice, something that we demonstrate in a concrete way.

And this love must hold nothing back, for Moses and Jesus and the scribe affirm that we must love God with all our strength. Now the Hebrew word we translate “strength” is the term “me’od,” and it is usually used as an adverb, meaning “much” or “very.” For example, after every day of creation, God said that what He had made was good, but it was only after God created human beings, that He looked at His creation and said it was “very good.” We are thus to love God with all our muchness, to the highest degree, with everything we are and everything we have. To put it in relational terms, our love for God, our devotion to God, our giving of ourselves to God must be as complete as it is exclusive.

And this is why Jesus begins His answer to the scribe the way He does in verse 29, for He doesn’t jump right into the Great Commandment. No, He roots the commandment to love God in the very Person, the very Being of God Himself. We are to love God with all we are and all we have, because God is One – He is the only true God. We are to love God exclusively, putting Him above everyone and everything else in our lives because God is One – there is no one else who belongs in first place. Given Who God is, nothing less than total worship, total devotion, total love for Him makes any sense.

And what does all of this mean about our relationships with other people? For after all, Moses and Jesus and the scribe all use the same word for our love for God that they use for our love for others. So, if we are to love them in the same way, that must mean that we are to be in the same sort of relationships with our neighbors that we are with God. That means that all of our human relationships are to be marked by a determination to give very much of ourselves, of all that we are, of our thoughts and feelings, of our bodies and spirits.

And if we understand love this way, as this sort of all-encompassing relationship, then what Paul says about it in our responsive reading just makes sense, doesn’t it? If we have determined to give ourselves to someone else, devoting all our thoughts, feelings and actions for his or her good, then of course we will be patient and kind toward our beloved. Of course we won’t boil with jealousy, because we are confident of our relationship with him or her. Of course we won’t boast or be proud of ourselves, because our thoughts and feelings are so focused on our beloved that we won’t think very much about ourselves at all. Of course we won’t be rude to our beloved or insist on getting what we want from our beloved, because true love means we are only interested in meeting his needs or her desires. Of course we won’t be provoked or think evil thoughts when everything in our relationship doesn’t go our way, because as long as our beloved is blessed, true love means we are 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?

Love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this: that He lay down His life for His friends – that’s what Jesus said, just before He went to the cross for a world full of sinners who crucified Him. 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 is

determined to express itself in actions, 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. And that sort of love really is all we need.