

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:34-40 NIV)

Our text for today invites us to look at our priorities and commitments. It asks each of us the question where are we at with our Lord and Savior? Let's take a look at how our relationship with God guides us in managing our lives in the heart, in the mind (Matt.23:1-12), in our families (including grief over those who've gone before) (Matt. 25:1-13), in our financial resources (Matt.25:14-30), and in showing compassion for our neighbors (Matt. 25: 31-46).

In response to these lawyers, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5. This is a reasonable question. What is the most central and important commandment in the Mosaic law they asked? Different rabbis had given different answers to that question. This is Jesus' answer. He uses the word 'mind' instead of 'might,' the verse commanding love of God with all of one's being and powers. Our whole life is to find unity in His love. The love of neighbor portion of this requires as much concern for others as a person has for his own welfare.

The story goes about a religious studies class in a university where a priest named John Powell taught. He said, "Some 14 years ago, I stood watching my university students file into the classroom for the opening session of my 'Theology of Faith' class. That was the first day I saw Tommy. He was combing his long flaxen hair, which hung six inches below his shoulders. I know it's what's in your head, not on

it, that counts; but at that time, I was unprepared for Tommy and wrote him off as strange-very strange. Tommy turned out to be the atheist in residence in my course. He constantly objected to or smirked at the possibility of an unconditionally loving God. We lived in relative peace for one semester, although at times he was a pain in the back pew. At the end of the course when he turned in his final exam, he asked in a slightly cynical tone, 'Do you ever think I'll find God?' I decided on a little shock therapy. 'No!' I said emphatically. 'Oh,' he responded. 'I thought that was the product you were pushing.'

I let him get five steps from the door, then called out, 'Tommy! I don't think you'll ever find Him, but I am certain that He will find you!' Tommy just shrugged and left. I felt slightly disappointed that he had missed my clever line.

Later, I heard that Tommy had graduated and I was grateful. Then came a sad report: Tommy had terminal cancer. Before I could search him out, he came to me. When he walked into my office, his body was badly wasted, and his long hair had fallen out because of chemotherapy. But his eyes were bright and his voice was firm for the first time in a long time. 'Tommy, I've thought about you so often. I hear you are sick,' I blurted out. 'Oh yes, very sick. I have cancer. It's a matter of weeks.' 'Can you talk about it?' 'Sure, what would you like to know?' "What's it like to be 24 and know you are dying?' 'Well, it could be worse!' 'Like what?' "Well, like being 50 'and having no values or ideals. Like being 50 and thinking that booze, seducing women and making money are the real biggies in life."

'But what I really came to see you about is something you said to me on the last day of class. I asked if you ever thought I would find God and you said 'no,' which surprised me. Then you said, 'But He will find you.' I thought about that a lot, even though my search was hardly intense at that time. But when the doctors removed a lump from my groin and told me it was malignant, I got serious about locating God. And when the malignancy spread to my vital organs, I really began banging against

the doors of heaven. But nothing happened. Well, one day I woke up, and -instead of throwing a few more futile appeals to a God who may or may not exist, I just quit. I decided I didn't care about God and the afterlife-or anything else for that matter. I decided to spend what time I had left doing something more profitable. I thought about you and something you had said in one of your lectures: 'The essential sadness is to go through life without loving.' But it would be equally sad to leave this world without telling those you love that you have loved them. So, I began with the hardest one: my dad. 'He was reading the paper when I approached him. 'Dad, I would like to talk to you.' "Well, talk," he replied. 'I mean, it's really important, Dad.' The newspaper came down three slow inches. 'What is it?' he asked. 'Dad, I love you. I just wanted you to know that.'

Tommy smiled at me and said with obvious satisfaction, as though he felt a warm and secret joy flowing inside him, 'The- newspaper fluttered to the floor. Then my father did two things I couldn't remember him doing before. He cried and he hugged me. And we talked all night even though he had to go to work the next day. 'It was easier with my mom and my little brother. They cried with me, too, and we hugged each other and shared things we had been keeping secret for so many years. I was only sorry that I had waited so long. Here I was, in the shadow of death, and I was just beginning to open up to all the people I had actually been close to. 'Then one day I turned around and God was there. He didn't come to me when I pleaded with him. Apparently, God does things His own way in His own time. The important thing is you were right. He found me even after I stopped looking for Him.' 'Tommy,' I gasped, 'I think you're saying something much more universal than you realize. You are saying that the surest way of finding God is not to make him a private possession or an instant consolation in time of need, but rather by opening up to love. 'Tommy, could I ask you a favor? Would you come to my 'Theology of Faith' class and tell my students what you just told me?'

Though we scheduled a date, he never made it. Of course, his life was not really ended by his death; it was only changed. He made the great step from faith into vision. He found a life far more beautiful than the eye of man has ever seen or the mind of man has ever imagined. Before Tommy died, we talked one last time. 'I'm not going to make it to your class,' he said. 'I know, Tom.' 'Will you tell them for me? Will you tell the whole world for me?' 'I will, Tom. I will tell them.' "He recalled the verse, *"We love, because God first loved us."* (I **John** 4:19) Jesus calls us to a willing and active love for our Lord and others.

Peterson's paraphrase of Philippians 4:6-7 says, *"Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life."* We are stewards of the heart, the center of our lives. Is Jesus on the throne of your heart? If so, keep him there. If not, consider placing Him there today. *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'* This is the first and greatest commandment. *And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* I find that when I pray to do that, I ask the Lord to help me to love my neighbor as He guides me. I'm not always sure how to best care for my neighbor be they someone living next door, homebound or nursing home people I visit for Holy Ghost or this congregation. Then there are mail requests. In everything, I have to rely on His guidance.

May God bless each of you as you seek to love God first and your neighbor as God guides you. Amen.