

LESSONS FOR LIVING
Deuteronomy 6: 4-9; Matthew 22: 34-40

As we turn to the classic texts from both the Old and the New Testaments about love, [you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might; and love your neighbor as yourself] I remind you about another book in the Bible focused on love that I mentioned last week: The Song of Songs. It is like a book of Valentine poetry for the people of Israel, who were intensely private about their love relations. Commentator Renita J. Weems writes this: “Filled with language of sensuality, longing, intimacy, playfulness, and human affection, Song of Songs introduces the reader to the non-public world of ancient Israel.” [*The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol.V.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, p. 363.] The whole book is blushingly sensual, culminating in the most famous words from one lover to another: “Set me as a seal upon your heart; as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death.” [8:6] Can you imagine a man reading those pages as part of his Bible reading? We know of at least one man who did. He nearly committed the passages to memory, which he used to anchor himself during months of solitary confinement. His name was John, but not any of the men named John we studied from that gospel during the last few weeks. He called himself John of the Cross and he joined the Carmelite order of monks in 1564. He was banished to a privy—a very crude toilet closet—in the monastery in Toledo, Spain. He was kept in that dark place without human contact and only received bread and water. After 8 months he escaped and went into hiding for two years. But during his imprisonment, when he could see and hear nothing, he focused on things he remembered and things he had read. Out of his memory of the Song of Songs, he imagined he was being loved—intensely loved—by God; and John loved him back. Listen to his short explanation: “[These] are the words of the soul already in the state of perfection, which is the union of love with God.” [*The Dark Night of the Soul & The Living Flame of Love*, London: Fount Paperbacks,

1995, p.6] John wrote about how he loved and felt loved by God; like a man in the armed forces might look at pictures of a girlfriend or wife to keep him motivated to live. John believed God loved him; he remembered John 3:16 about God loving the world so much, but he wrote poetry in his head, committing it to memory. At the end of his tortuous captivity, he wrote down what he wrote in his head. The first poem was *The Dark Night of the Soul* ...in which the absence of God is painfully felt....*The Living Flame of Love* considers the divine illumination that follows the dark night, describing the happiness and peace experienced by the soul devoted to God.” [Fount Classics, 1995, back cover.] In the background of such an example of love for God, we hear the great words from Deuteronomy known as the “Shema” the Hebrew word for “Hear.” “Hear O Israel.... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” [6:4] That description certainly sounds like love to the nth degree, doesn’t it? But do we love God as completely as John seemed to love God? Or do we ignore God like some may ignore the pleas of a child, or the pleas of a spouse? How do we treat the one who we promised, often before God, to “love, honor and cherish?” All of Israel was supposed to hear, [and commit to memory] the words that Moses declared to them. But as you have heard, we also find these words on the lips of Jesus with the slight altering of the word “might” to “mind.” Which way sounds like the most complete kind of loving to you? Choose *that* way of loving God. The one who, as Christians believe, sent his Son into the world so that, by his death, the world could be saved. This God loves us as much as the father running toward his prodigal son in Luke 15. This God loves us so much that he created a world—and a garden—in which we could live. Talk about your dream home! And through Jesus, we hear God’s love resonate again: in Matthew 28, as Jesus departs the earth, he says, “And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” How does someone depart and still stay with you? I know many people who still feel the closeness, the words of love, and the

advice from departed loved ones. And Jesus is more powerful than they are! In Jesus Christ, we have the personification of love. In Jesus, he absorbed in his soul the things he was taught as a young Jewish boy, a boy with a human father and a Heavenly Father. He felt loved. And he taught love. So John of the Cross gives us a pinnacle example of truly loving God, and feeling loved by God in return. Doing my research on John for my doctoral project inspired me to intensify my love for God, not just saying “I love you,” but showing God love. Saying “I love you,” and showing love are two different challenges.

But that is only part of the greatest commandment as Jesus shared it. He dug into another part of what he had been taught forever—words from the Levitical priests who were revered for their teachings. When all the other sons of Jacob were given territory, Levi was given the priesthood, and so he was always teaching the ways of Torah—the first five books of what we call the Bible. The book of the priests called Leviticus is part of the fundamental teaching for all Jews, and later, for many Christians. Jesus tied the two commandments to love together: love God completely, and, “love your neighbor as yourself.” How would you show love to your neighbor? What is appropriate love? What is sacrificial love? One Jewish woman I recently read about truly loved her neighbor.

Idit Harel Segal was turning 50, and she had chosen a gift: she was going to give one of her kidneys to a stranger. The kindergarten teacher from Northern Israel, a proud Israeli, hoped her choice would set an example of generosity in a land of perpetual conflict. She was spurred by memories of her late grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, who told her to live meaningfully and by Jewish tradition, which holds that there is no higher duty than saving a life. So Segal contacted a group that links donors and recipients, launching a nine month process to transfer her kidney to someone who needed one. That someone turned out to be a three-year-old Palestinian boy from the Gaza Strip. ‘You don’t know me, but soon we’ll be very close because my kidney will be in your body.’ Segal wrote in Hebrew to the boy A friend translated the

letter in Arabic so the family might understand. [Then she wrote:] I hope with all my heart that this surgery will succeed, and you will live a long and healthy and meaningful life.” [*Christian Century*, August 25, 2021, p.18.]

Well isn't that a truly beautiful, sacrificial story? Yes, but. In life there can often be those who want to break up the beautiful. The story continued:

What unfolded over the months between Segal's decision and the June 16th transplant caused deep rifts in [her] family. Her husband and the oldest of her three children, a son in his early 20s, opposed her plan of undergoing a major surgery. Her father stopped talking to her.” [p. 18]

The tensions between Israel and the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are infamous, and yet, by the words of Leviticus and the words that Jesus himself proclaimed, we are to love our neighbors. Palestinians and Israelis qualify as neighbors, like it or not. Fortunately, there is a blessing in the gift from this unselfish neighbor. Listen:

For Segal, the gift that sparked such conflict in her family accomplished more than she hoped. Her kidney helped save the boy's life and generated a second donation. On the same day his son received a new kidney, the boy's father donated one of his own—to a 25-year-old Israeli mother of two.

After I read St. John of the Cross's “Dark Night of the Soul,” I redoubled my efforts to love God. After reading about an Israeli Kindergarten teacher's donation of an organ, I am now considering new ways to show love to my neighbors.

What about you? Are you loving God as much as you could be? Are you loving neighbors, even if they are a different faith, or a different race, or a different political affiliation? Two weeks ago I said that “life is difficult.” Today we recognize that *love* is difficult, not just for partners, or for children, but for neighbors. How might we make move the line from what we were once not willing to do, to a place where we might now be willing? Organ donation is a sacrificial gift, but you can start with care and kindness, qualities that embody love.

Let us pray: “O Lord, we know you love us. Can you tell we love you? May our actions support our words. Amen.