St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday October 29th

Theme: (Matthew 22 The Greatest Commandment)

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I runga i te ingoa o te papa, te tama, me te wairua tapu.

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

*Amen*

(Songs and poems slide)

**All you need is love (the Beatles); I will always love you (Dolly Parton); Can’t help falling in love (Elvis Presley); Love, love, me do (the Beatles); How deep is your love (Bee Gees); I’ll never love again (Lady Gaga); Crazy little thing called love (Queen); It must have been love (Roxette); Endless love (Diana Ross); I just called to say I love you (Stevie Wonder); The power of love (Jennifer Rush); Love is the sweetest thing (Al Bowlly 1932); Somebody to love (Queen); What’s love got to do with it? (Tina Turner); Can you feel the love tonight? (Elton John); Bye Bye love (Everley Brothers);**

**My love is like a red, red, rose (Robert Burns); Shall I compare thee to a Summer’s Day? (William Shakespeare); How do I love thee (Elizabeth Barrett Browning); Let me not to the marriage of true minds (Sonnet 116, William Shakespeare); Love and friendship (Emily Bronte); She walks in beauty (Lord Byron);**

And so on! Hundreds and hundreds of songs and poetry which exalt love.

But today, we are told by Jesus himself, in no uncertain terms, that irrespective of any other ‘emotional’ love feelings we might have, hear, or read about,

(Commandments slide)

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment.

And a second is like it – You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”



The key problem in interpreting this double commandment for our time, is that we lose sight of the biblical meaning of love. Our culture equates love with intense emotion. To love is a stronger response than to like. Both are measures of a passive response to something outside us.

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Most of us love chocolate: we cannot help ourselves. We can love a movie: it entertains or moves us. We love a boy or girlfriend: they make us happy. We love a spouse: they complete us. But biblical love is not passive, and it is not strictly emotional. In the Old Testament, there are references to many kinds of love, but the love referred to here by Jesus is the love of Yahweh. This love is far from passive. It is the active response of the faithful person to the love of God.

(God’s love)

God’s love is also active. God created us, and chooses (elects) to love us. To love God with all our heart, and soul, and mind, is to choose to respond to God just as God chooses to love us. Normal human feelings and emotions do not enter into this equation.

(Agape)

In the New Testament, the principal word used for love is *agape*. It does have some connection to emotion, where God cares for God’s creatures and creation.

1. But, chiefly, it refers to what can be called loving-kindness. It is not passive emotion, but active mercy. It is marked by patience and generosity, again, both acts generated by the one who loves.
2. In short, God’s kind of loving is a choice, not a feeling.

To love God with all our heart, mind, and soul seems nearly impossible when we think of love as an emotion. How do we conjure up feelings for something as remote, mysterious, and disembodied as the concept of God? We cannot look into God’s eyes, wrap our arms around the Spirit, or even see his face. If we could, that might evoke in us a profound *feeling* of love. We might fall in love with Jesus’ beauty and grace if we could know him as Mary and Martha did. But we are commanded to love an intangible God. It is possible that many of us will admit failure in feeling a deep, abiding affection for a God who is often distant and unknown. Nevertheless, to love God is our duty as Christians. It goes with the territory!

(3)Likewise, loving our neighbour is difficult. Sometimes, really difficult. If love is merely our passive response to the person next to us, we are likely more often to be repulsed than moved to love. How can we legitimately look into the face of an enemy and feel unqualified love? It is nearly impossible. Here’s a thought to hold! The first barrage of missiles fired into Gaza hit the Anglican hospital there – Al Ahli. Huge damage, loss of life, and horrendous injuries to totally innocent people.

By calling us to love our neighbour, Jesus particularises love. He does not call us just to love the bits of the whole world where we might feel cultural or kinship connection, which we might prefer. It is easier to love the abstract rather than the particular—to love people similar to us whom we have never met, instead of the neighbour who mows his lawn while we are trying to sleep, or the youths doing burnouts in their cars along our street in the middle of the night. It is easier to drop a dollar in the offering for flood relief in a distant land than to tend to a sick neighbour’s needs. It is easier to love someone who is working multiple jobs in order to send money back to the family in a village devastated by floods or fires, than a man roaming the rural state of Maine indiscriminately shooting anyone he can find. Jesus offers no quarter at this point—the love to which he calls us has a face—the face is that of our neighbour, next door, or on the other side of the world holding the firing pin of a missile or a high powered rifle — and the face is not necessarily pretty.

To love neighbour as oneself is to act toward the other as we would act toward those close to us. We treat the stranger as well as we treat those that we love emotionally. Biblical love is not passive. It is not something that occurs to us without our control or will. Biblical love is something we do. It is loving-kindness, merciful action that is both generous and continuous.

This means that, to those with whom we are intimate, to those we do not know, to those who may be dirty or repugnant, and even to those who harm us, we should act according to the law of love. We need to be merciful and gracious. To love our neighbour as ourselves is to make a conscious choice and act upon it. Jesus clearly set the bar very high, but did all that, right to the very end of his life on earth.

(Choose God)

So, what about this love of God? Again, as God chose us and elected to forgive our every offense, so we can choose God and serve him in every way.

(1)We can love with our heart: through generosity to God’s people.
(2)We can love with our soul: by worshiping God and praying for our neighbours and ourselves.
(3)And we can love with our minds: studying God’s Word and letting it correct us, enlighten us, and send us out in loving action to the world.

(The great commanments)

See how these commandments are connected, “the greatest commandment” and the “second, which is like it”? When we love God’s people, we are always, and at the same time loving God. They are inseparable. Surprisingly, sometimes our emotions follow suit, and we actually feel a love of other, or a love of God. But the emotion is not commanded. Only the ***action*** of love is commanded. In Christ, this we can do, even when we don’t feel like it.

When Jesus says that the law and prophets hang on these two commandments (to love God and neighbour), he is saying that these commandments summarise the greatest wisdom to be found in scripture. He is also saying that these commandments are a sure guide to God’s will—that, if we act in a loving way toward God by doing what God wants us to do—and if we act in a loving way toward our neighbour by doing that which benefits our neighbour—we can be sure that we will be in full compliance with God’s law. John echoes this when he says, “If anyone says he loves God but hates his brother, he is a liar.”

Jesus not only commands us to love others, but to love others as we love our own selves.

 “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself”. It’s a tough call, and very often we don’t manage it. However, as God loves us, we are continually given the opportunity to try harder next time. That’s one of the bonuses of being a Christian. We can always have a second chance.

Amen

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