

THE CORE OF THE GOSPEL

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In November 2006, Larry Smith, publisher of SMITH magazine and an encourager of writers, challenged his community to write their memoirs using only six words. And “Six-Words Memoir” was born and has become an international phenomenon. According to the “Six-Words Memoir” website, the first entries ranged “from the bitter-sweet (‘Cursed with cancer, blessed with friends’) to the inspirational (‘From migrant worker to NASA astronaut’) to the hilarious (‘Married by Elvis, divorced by Friday’).” The website says, “Six-Word Memoirs have become a powerful tool to inspire conversation around a big idea.”¹

In the second century A.D., Justin Martyr, himself a Greek philosopher and Christian convert, wrote a defense of Christianity against the antagonism of Greek philosophers. Since he was writing to a non-Christian audience, he referred to the Gospels as “the Memoirs of the Apostles.” He wrote that in Sunday services of worship, “the Memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets [from the Old Testament] are read, for as long as time permits.”²

Suppose you were asked to write a “Six-Words Memoir” of the gospels. What would you write? How about this for a suggestion? “Love your God. Love your neighbor”? According to Jesus, these are the greatest commandments.” They have been called the “core of the gospel” and the “heart of discipleship.” Those six words — “Love your God. Love your neighbor.” — can be “a powerful tool to inspire conversation around a big idea.”

In 386 A.D., another early Christian theologian named Jerome, wrote four commentaries on the letters of the apostle Paul, including the Letter to the Galatians. Galatians 6:10 says, “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” In his remarks about this verse, Jerome wrote this story: “The blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age. His disciples could barely carry him to church and he could not muster the voice to speak many words. During individual gatherings he usually said nothing but, ‘Little children, love one another.’ The disciples and brothers in attendance, annoyed because they always heard the same words, finally said, ‘Teacher, why do you always say this?’ He replied with a line worthy of John: ‘Because it is the Lord’s commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient.’”³

The lawyer and the rest of the Pharisees who tested Jesus with the question, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”, knew Jesus had given the right answer. They were trying to provoke a theological argument in which they could show him up and undermine his appeal to the masses. But Jesus stumped the religious au-

thorities, not because he taught something brand new and mysterious, but something well-known and fundamental — “Love your God. Love your neighbor.” — taken straight from the Hebrew scriptures.

It is said that at the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had developed 613 laws to govern everyday life and help the people live in a right relationship with God. Maybe the lawyer wanted to tie Jesus up in knots and make him lose his way in that maze of regulations. Maybe the lawyer hoped Jesus would alienate some folks in the crowd by picking this law over that law. Maybe the lawyer, on behalf of the Pharisees, wanted to “prove” to the people that they had the right answers and that Jesus was a misguided teacher.

Maybe it was all of the above. But, in his answer — “Love your God. Love your neighbor.” — Jesus cut to the core of the gospel. And he underlined his message by telling those experts in God’s law, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Think about walking into your house. Maybe you have a coat rack on your wall or standing in the corner just inside your back door. Your arms are full of groceries or you’re shaking out a wet umbrella or your dog is pulling on her leash or you’re just tired at the end of a long day. You shrug off your coat and, almost absent-mindedly, hang your coat on the coat rack. Obviously, if the coat rack wasn’t nailed to the wall or standing in the corner, your coat would wind up in a pile on the ground. The same thing would happen if you weren’t careful in hanging up your coat. Listen to how The Message translates Jesus’ summary statement: “These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from them.”

What peg do you hang your life on? What is your guiding principle that organizes your life, gives your life meaning, informs your day-in and day-out choices, and guides you in your moral and ethical life? When Jesus tells us to “love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” he means for us to love God with everything we’ve got and to love God in an integrated way. We want to compartmentalize our lives (or we think we can compartmentalize our lives) so that one area doesn’t intrude on another. We want to divvy up our time and energy and parcel out our loyalties. Besides leading to a splintered and exhausting way of living, when we compartmentalize our lives — especially when it comes to loving God and neighbor — we end up making God’s claim and command on our lives just one more thing to factor in. But, as Jesus teaches and the scriptures make clear, “Love your God. Love your neighbor” is at the very heart of our identity as followers of Jesus Christ.

Don’t you wish Jesus had given us some kind of list of what to do so we could know for sure that we “love our God and love our neighbor”? But this story is so typical of Jesus. The truth is unavoidable, but how we live out the truth is something we have to figure out. In my own journey of faith, I finally concluded that these great commandments that Jesus teaches are what it’s all about. That’s not an original thought and maybe it doesn’t strike you as a great revelation. But it was a turning point for me a few years ago. After years of wandering through the maze of “shoulds” and “oughts,” to hear again “the core of gospel” was both freeing and challenging. Freeing, because “love

your God, love your neighbor” is life-giving. Challenging, because, well, you know as well as I why it’s challenging . . .

And yet, that is what we are called to do — “love your God, love your neighbor.” Simone Weill was a young French philosopher in the first half of the 20th century. She was raised in a secular and agnostic household, but was drawn to the Christian faith, especially by the idea of loving your neighbor. She wrote, “The love of our neighbor in all its fullness means being able to say, ‘What are you going through?’” We might call that “love in action,” the kind of love Jesus commands, the kind of love Jesus names as the greatest commandment, the kind of love God showed us when “God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son.”

I joked with the Bible study groups this week that this story from Matthew made me want to read the gospel lesson and then say “Go and do likewise. Amen” and sit down — sort of like the Apostle John in Ephesus. In a sense, that’s what I’ve ended up doing! Because that’s what Jesus tells us to do, because that is what is most important, that is the core of the gospel.

When I went to the 2017 Montreat Youth Conference with our presbytery group, Rev. Bruce Reyes Chow was the preacher for the week. Each night he ended his sermon with the same benediction: “Go forth into the world with compassion and justice in your heart. Give strength to the weak. Give voice to the silent. See one another. Hear one another. Care for one another. Love God and love one another. It’s all that easy and it’s all that hard.”

“The Core of the Gospel” — a “Six-Words Memoir” — “Love your God. Love your neighbor.” It’s all that easy and it’s all that hard. It’s the life we are called to live as followers of Jesus Christ. As the Bible says, “We love because God first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

Let us pray: Loving God, may our love for you become real in our love for our neighbors. May our hearts and hands reach out with the love you have given us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “Six Words Gets to the Point,” at www.sixwordmemoirs.com.

² Glenn Davis, “The Development of the Canon of the New Testament: Justin Martyr, Saint,” at www.ntcanon.org.

³ “What is the origin of the story that the Apostle John taught only ‘love one another?’” at www.christianity.stackexchange.com.