

Sale Cathedral 25 October 2020 Rev Daniel Lowe

Love the Lord Your God with all your Heart and Soul and Mind

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

It is wonderful to be with you in spirit if not in person for this service. Just in case you are trying to figure out which bit of the cathedral I am in, I should tell you that I am actually filming this sermon from Warragul Anglican Church.

When I first started out in Youth Ministry there was a game that was very popular on youth camps. It was called “If you love me honey, give me a smile” and would probably be considered somewhat inappropriate these days (even without COVID). The general idea was that the person in the middle of the circle had to choose a victim and attempt to make them smile in response to the phrase, “If you love me honey, give me a smile”. Funny faces and silly voices, along with an awkward invasion of personal space, were generally the keys to success.

On the surface it seems like a relatively innocent (if slightly inappropriate) game but I wonder whether it hints at a view of love that is pervasive in our culture and quite possibly in our churches. It is an “if...then” view of love. A transactional love.

I saw a quote recently which captured this idea well:

“True friendship is when you walk into their house and your Wi-Fi connects automatically.”

So many of our relationships are based on some sort of transactional agreement. It isn't always articulated, or even conscious, but we do it nonetheless.

To some extent this is normal, necessary and simply the way our society functions. Some relationships are transactional by nature – the car mechanic we prefer, the barista in the café that serves coffee just how we like it – these relationships are based on the service they provide for us and if that service doesn't live up to our expectations then we will probably end the relationship. The problems start when all of our relationships become transactional because this means we have started to treat other people as commodities. Everything starts being about what we can get from the other person. And if that person doesn't give us what we feel that we deserve then the relationship crumbles. It is the damaging extension of a consumerist society.

A recent article by social commentator David Brooks describes this culture as “a kind of hyper individualism that makes life about self-interest, self-expression, and personal freedom” and leads to “Our lack of healthy connection to each other, our inability to see the full dignity of each other, and the resulting culture of fear, tribalism, and strife.”

We see it all around us. Our politics is shaped by transaction and driven by fear – a combination that has only been heightened by the corona virus. Our public discourse revolves around our rights and how they are being violated or protected. We move in and out of jobs, friendships and romantic relationships depending on what we can get from them. It is all about “what we need at that time”.

Even our churches and our own faith understanding has been tainted by this transactional mentality.

So, what does transactional faith look like? We probably refer to it more often as a works-based faith. We convince ourselves that if only we prayed more regularly, or went to church more often, or read the Bible more, or sang louder... then God will be more pleased with us. I wonder sometimes if we hear about having faith the size of a mustard seed and we think in terms of trading up.

In 2005 Canadian blogger Kyle MacDonald bartered his way from a single red paperclip to a house in a series of 14 online trades over the course of a year. This was some seriously creative transactional work!

I'm sure the dialogue in my head has gone a bit like this at times: "God, if I can manage to trust you with this little thing then when you come through for me my faith will grow and I'll be able to trust you with something bigger. I'll start with faith the size of a mustard seed and trade up from there."

Our worship can become transactional as well. Author Skye Jethani puts it like this: "Because of our consumer mindset, we assume that worship must have a concrete outcome; some practical purpose that measurably benefits either God or us...worship is a means to an end; it is a transaction in which we offer to the deity what he needs (praise, prayers, sacrifices) and in response, we expect to receive what we need (blessing, protection, wealth etc.)"

So what happens when we drop Jesus' command into the midst of this transactional culture? What is the greatest commandment? Not 'Love yourself'; Not 'Love the ones who love you back'; Not 'Take what you need and leave the rest'.

No, Jesus says the greatest command is to 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

No 'if...then' clause. No sliding scale of love given and love returned.

Simply this. Love God with everything you have.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."
All! Everything! All in!

Will we ever be prepared to pay that price? Will we be able to? I doubt it. We might like to think we would but as fallen human beings I think the reality is very different.

And the second is like it. Love your neighbour as yourself.

How can we ever do that?

Fact is, we really don't know how to do that — to love like that — were it not for one startling truth: we have been loved like that.

Here is the thing that blows any of our transactional efforts with God out of the water. God puts it all on the table from the start. There is no bargaining needed. God puts it all on the table unconditionally! He says, "I've given it all already. Regardless of what you choose to do, I'm giving you my love." There is nothing left to bargain with. No transaction is necessary or even possible. We are loved by One who persists in the face of rebellion, hatred, and infidelity. We are loved by One who leads with mercy and understanding, not judgment and condemnation. God's love for us is the opposite of transaction.

Have you ever been out to dinner with a friend and when it comes time to pay, you discover that they have already paid for you both when they popped out to the bathroom earlier? It doesn't matter how much you protest, that dinner is paid for. Nothing you can do will change that. That is what God's love is like!

And that he is how he calls us to love others. In fact, the very evidence that we love God is the way we love others.

“When we see ourselves as recipients of divine love, the connections between and among us become more obvious. We’re able to see ourselves united both in need and in ability to give. We become able to look up from the balance sheet, step away from the scales, turn off the calculator. Because suddenly (or gradually) we discover they don’t matter. It’s not exchanging love for love; it’s loving for the sake of loving. It’s not a transaction in which we receive in proportion to what we give. We learn to love because God first loved us.”

(Louise Westfall, Presbyterian Pastor)

God’s love is not transactional, it is transformational. God has been in the business of transformation from the beginning. He took Moses with all his faults and transformed his life so that as we heard in the Old Testament reading, “He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt”. He has transformed the lives of Princes and prostitutes alike.

Whether you are a new Christian or a faithful follower of many years, I suspect it is very easy to slip into a transactional relationship with God because everything else around us says that is how relationships work. When life is good, I try and do deals with God to make sure it stays that way, and when life is hard, I try to bargain with God to make things better. Transacting with God means I get to stay in control. But God says love me with your whole heart, your whole mind, your whole being. And then he goes and loves us just like that – all in – and every time we begin to grasp hold of that love, we are transformed by it.

And this is God’s transformational vision for the church.

Paul was at pains to remind the Thessalonians that his time with them, the message of hope that he shared with them, was not transactional. “You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of the Lord.”

We need to be careful not just as individuals but that as churches we don’t fall into a transactional relationship with the communities we serve. Are we willing to serve the needy only if we also get a seat in the corridors of power? Are we willing to give generously and charitably only as long as we receive the benefits of tax exemptions? Do we extend welcome only to those who make us feel comfortable or salve our conscience by their presence?

This is God’s vision for our lives.

“We learn to love, not for the reward, but for the goodness it generates. We love, not to get something, but because love changes the way the world works. Instead of shame we experience acceptance and grace; longstanding enmity and estranged relationships are reconciled beyond anything imaginable. When we give generously without fear, we discover abundance — never-ending, overflowing, infinitely more than we could ever calculate. Love begets love.”

May you know the transformational love of God and may it lead you to love others wholeheartedly.