

Rock, You, Hard Place

Text: Deuteronomy 10:12-21

Hymn: "Where Charity and Love Prevail" (LSB 845)

The great Christian theologian St. Augustine once wrote, "If you want to know what is in the heart of a person, do not ask him what he believes but what he loves." What Augustine was talking about is the difference between the head and the heart. How many times have I heard, "I don't have the time or feel the need to be in church, but it doesn't matter, because I believe in Jesus and all that." To which Augustine says, "I'm not interested in what's in your head; I'm interested in what's in your heart." You've managed to fit "Jesus and all that" into the enclosed space of your head. Great! But that's neither here nor there.

Your thoughts and your beliefs don't save you. Who saves you is Jesus. And Jesus doesn't come to you in your thoughts and in your beliefs. He comes to you in His Word, which you must receive in faith—not mere belief—but *faith*. Faith is *trust*, not simply putting a string of sentences together and organizing them in a logical way. What you hold to be true doesn't tell me anything about the state of your heart. Show me what you love by the way you live and I will learn an awful lot about your heart.

This word "heart" hits us in the face more than once in our readings this morning. Moses has this almost flippantly cruel introduction to our Old Testament reading:

Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?

That's not asking too much, is it? Just over a millennium later, Jesus is posed the question, "Which is the greatest commandment?" To which He gave the answer that,

strictly speaking, there are two: “The first one, You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...And a second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s all God wants from you!

What is in your heart determines which way you’re facing. And which way you’re facing determines which way you’ll be going. Unless you love the LORD your God with your heart and face towards Him, you will not go to Him. You will go away from Him. If you love other things more than Him, then you will devote your heart and your life to those things and they will give you what they are able to give you. But if you love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, then you’ll be facing towards Him and He’ll give the things He is able to give you.

As Moses put it so neatly, “These things God has commanded *for your good.*” Not to give you something to keep you busy. Not to make sure you that you stay in your place or that you don’t have too much fun. But rather *for your good.* This is why Christians must say with St. Paul that “the law of the Lord is holy and righteous and good.” It’s holy and righteous and good, because the law of the LORD is the will of God. And God’s will is not bipolar or contradictory. The will of the LORD is one and the same. God is love and God is good. If you don’t love God and His will, then you don’t love Love itself and you don’t love what is good.

And so these words of Moses and of Jesus are a terrible and rude shock to us whenever we pay any attention to them. *All* your heart. *All* your mind. Keep *all* the commandments. With that insistent, terrible *all*, God pokes a finger in the festering sore of our sin. He puts a bright, unblemished mirror in front of our filthy faces and says,

“Have a look at this! How does that feel? You are to love me with all your being, body, mind, soul. That is what I desire. That is my will.”

And since God is God, the Creator of the heavens and earth, and the one who judges the living and the dead, He will have his way. He will insist on His will being done on earth as it is in heaven. Every sin, every rebellion, every moment of carelessness, every mistake will be, must be accounted for. Every slip from that *all* God will require of someone’s hand. Jesus said that for every careless word you must give account (Mt 13:26). How many of those pass our lips each day?

And this then is where we find ourselves—between a rock and a hard place. The more we contemplate this God who gives us these commandments and who says that when we fail, He will require it of our hand, the less we are able to love Him. The more anxious it makes us. And anxiety doesn’t lead to loving the person more. It leads to being worried. You become afraid of God, even angry with Him.

But it’s impossible to learn to love God, because you know that God is saying things to you that you have no reply to other than, “Lord, I can’t. I can’t love you with all my heart, with all my mind, my body and strength. And to be frank, I don’t want to.” Which of us actually wants to keep all the commandments? We do in principle, but not the actual commandments when we meet them in our everyday life. We say we don’t want to gossip up until a really desirable opportunity to gossip comes along.

Paul in his letter to Titus speaks of this mindset: “We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and desires, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another” (Ti 3:3). There’s a beautiful picture! Hated by others and hating one another. And hating God!

And so we are between a rock and a hard place. The more God insists, the less we are able to do anything other than to become more afraid or more angry. But when you run away from God, you run away from love. You run away from love, goodness, and life. What is our escape from this? How do we escape the soul-destroying pressure between the rock and the hard place?

The short answer is Jesus. In Deuteronomy, after God sets his demand before his people, He says,

Behold, to the Lord your God belong the heaven, the heaven of heavens, and the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all people, as you are this day.

Why is God giving this seeming terrible and odious task to His disobedient and stubborn people, to do all the things they are supposed to do but can't? Because in love He chose their fathers before them. God gives His law to His people because He loves them first. "This is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us" (1 Jn 4:10).

Without Jesus you are stuck. You will be stuck until God requires your iniquities from your hand and then you will be stuck in eternal condemnation. If you never experience the love of God, you will never learn to love God and therefore love will pass you by and you will pass all eternity without any love at all.

But, you see, Jesus did this. Jesus did love God with all His heart, with all His soul, and with all His mind, and His very body. He loved God so much that He was willing to do whatever God's love required, because this is what love is, isn't it? If you love someone, you love them as they are and you learn to love the things that they love.

Jesus loved the Father, which means he loved the Father's will; the Father's will was to save the creation. And so Jesus devoted his heart, mind, soul, even His body to

doing what the Father loved. He came and was obedient to the Father. He kept all the commandments and all the will of God, all of it. And with His whole being, all that He was, He was obedient to the Father until death, even death on a cross. And in this one man Jesus, Moses' words were met with obedience. God required it and Jesus did it. Jesus loved His neighbor as Himself. He loved *you* as Himself. He thought that His life was worth giving up for your life. Therefore you have been redeemed from your loveless universe. You've been redeemed from your lifeless idols that cannot save you. You've been redeemed, not by learning to love but by receiving love.

You see, commandments and demands and requirements will never generate love in the recipient. But unmerited love works like magic. Unmerited love received cannot but generate love in return. Here is the great mystery of our faith. Not only did Jesus love the Father above all things more than His own life. Not only did Jesus love you as Himself and was not only willing to die for you that you might live but all that He was and is and did and does He gives to you now. You are even now declared righteous and just and holy and good and pure before God, because Jesus is the one who will answer for you. On the Last Day when God will require your sins of you, Jesus will speak up. It is from His hand that your iniquities will be demanded.

More than this, your heart has been circumcised. Paul in his letter to the Colossians calls our baptism just that—a circumcision of the heart (Col 2:11,12). We who passed our days hated by others and hating one another, have now received love and in this love are we able to love. We are not stuck in this eternal circle of sin, forgiveness, and then going back to square one; instead, we have been given the grace

of the Holy Spirit, who sets our hearts on fire in love. It's a dim fire, to be sure, but nothing like what God would require of us if we still had to answer for our own sins.

This is the love of God that He not only saves us in a moment but He loves us now until all eternity. He has freed us from all fear and anxiety and from all hatred and anger towards Him. We are now His dear children, who no longer have anything to expect from Him except His love for us in Jesus Christ. And therefore we have love for the neighbor, because we've been given new eyes to see the world with, the eyes of Jesus. If Jesus is good enough to die for me, and I'm an unworthy neighbor, that frees me to be good enough to die for my neighbor, if need be. And though in this life we're still on the battlefield where the malicious old me still lives in this flesh, yet Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father. As Jesus quotes from Psalm 110 in the Gospel reading today, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.'" That includes the enemy that lives within you—anything that fights against God's will within you. When Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead, He is going to put the old you under His feet and He will trample it down, and you will be raised to new life. *You* will be raised but he or she won't. The new man and the new woman in Christ will live forever. The old Adam will stay down for all eternity.

And when we rise on that new day, we will live in perfect love, receiving without any diminution the full love of God, face to face, freed from our inordinate love of ourselves, and able for the first time and for eternity to love as we are loved. Of this we have a foretaste already. Each redemptive moment of love between the members of the body of Christ is pointing to this great reality of one humanity in the one Lord Jesus Christ, who loved me and gave himself up for me. Amen.