	Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18
	Psalm 1
October 25, 2026	1Thessalonians 2:1-8
The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost	Matthew 22:34-46

You have become very dear to us…

I kept reading these words from Paul this week and reflecting on what it means to hold someone dear. It's a sentiment that we typically reserve for someone who holds a special place in our hearts, who we care for, who we value. When I think of how it feels to have a dear friend, I think of kindness and warmth, of inside jokes, of loss and joy, of celebrations and failures. I think of the shared journey of life, the ebb and flow of growing together. And above all, I think of how we long for those dear to us to be happy, healthy and whole.

But it isn't a sentiment that we offer to just anyone. You don't become dear overnight. You might even say that the process of our *"dear-ness"* is costly. It requires our capacity to enter into a relationship with someone and generously give of ourselves in an ever-deepening process of companionship.

And so it made me think about the important outcomes of those ever-deepening relationships as a way to understand our Gospel reading this morning. Because frankly, when we talk about love, Christian love, we tend to throw it around without considering the implications. And if I can be so bold…it seems to me that the greatest command that Jesus gives in Matthew is lacking in some much-needed clarity and practicality.

So, let's dig in.

In Matthew, this is how Jesus responds to the question, *"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"* He says…***"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 neighbor as yourself.'***

OK…great. We know these verses. This commandment should be no surprise to any of us. We have probably recited these words a hundred times or more. And I think most of us genuinely feel that we try to live into them. And most of us do a fairly good job.

But we also pull this commandment out when we see people acting anything less than kind and compassionate. In some ways, these two verses can serve us all very, very well as the ultimate "Gotcha!" moment. The judge and jury of who is being the right kind of Christian…the litmus test of appropriate faithfulness.

Have you caught yourself reciting these verses (maybe slightly under your breath) in judgement of someone else's actions? All the while patting yourself on the back for doing better in your own life.

We all do it. But these verses aren't meant to be our hall monitor for other people's behavior. They are meant to be our *teacher* so that we continue to cultivate a more loving attitude within our own hearts. And then, we are better able to cultivate a more loving, life-giving community for others. Let me suggest that learning to love is a work in progress…for all of us. The faithful underachievers and the faithful overachievers.

And so, when Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself, we aren't meant to hear that commandment theoretically. We aren't meant to take it as a nice suggestion. We are meant to hear it and to actively seek ways to practice it with others.

But for many of us, that is tough to do when we don't know someone. Or when we are apprehensive or fearful. Or when we have placed judgement on someone's beliefs or the way they look or where they live. And sometimes we are just too busy to stop and have a conversation.

We keep our distance because distance provides safety and predictability. Most of us, if we are honest, would prefer to choose who we are called to love. Neither of which honors Jesus' teaching. So, we have to figure out how to work with the stumbling blocks that hold us back from truly being the hands and heart of Christ when presented with someone who needs our care.

This is where the practice of *dearness* comes in. Because when we develop the relationships that we call dear, our natural response is to love with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. And the more we practice developing *dearness* the more our capacity to love grows and expands. Our apprehension and fear dissolves because now we are friends.

Here's what I mean…

Baptist minister Kirk Byron Jones describes the process of building *dearness* as requiring three things…time, attention, and grace.[1]

Time is obvious. Remember…dearness is costly. It requires our capacity AND effort to enter into a relationship with someone and generously give of ourselves in an ever-deepening process of companionship. That requires time.

Attention conveys our ability to be present to another person. We can't rush through our conversations. We can't ask how are you doing and expect a passing…I'm OK. We need to ask with true concern and listen with true care. We have to be ready to hold space for each other,

[1] https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/october-25-ordinary-30a-1-thessalonians-2-1-8?code=trrJ3hn7FTkjf5nSHq5G&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=d06f268fe8-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_DEEPER_2026-10-21&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-cb6a0e7463-86220411

have empathy for one another, understand one another, learn from one another…even when it is hard and uncomfortable. Even when it is inconvenient.

And then we must have ***grace***. (This is my favorite). Jones says that, "*Grace is knowing that you have never once seen the true weight of what another person is carrying, and you have never accurately measured how well they are holding up under it. You are always guessing. So, guess generously."*

That's the heart of Paul's statement…*So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.*

Paul has offered ***time*** and ***attention*** and ***grace*** to the Thessalonians and that has created the foundation for a genuine love to emerge. Their well-being matters to Paul. He lives into Christ's command because he has practiced being with his neighbors. The result…he has built a solid foundation of love in his community.

Theologian Zina Jacque stated it like this…

"Love is not a feeling that comes and goes. It is a choice, made again and again, in the direction of someone else's good….You cannot will the good of someone you have quietly decided is beneath you. You cannot love…without first making interior room for the other person to matter as much as you do."[2]

And Paul made that choice consistently.

We live in a culture that is so quick to judge whose in, whose out, whose right, whose wrong. We put people into categories before we have ever had a chance to get to know them. And we are fed these kind of divisive categories every time we turn around…in our news, in our social media, in our work places and even in many faith communities. We are taught to love, but with certain limits.

The thing is…Christ has no limits. He didn't give us conditions upon which to share our love. Instead, what he did give us was his example…not just one commandment, but a whole life of showing us how to draw closer to one another, how to know one another, how to care for one another.

And…how to be dear to one another.

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[2] https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30/commentary-on-matthew-2234-46-7