

Generous to Our Core

This summer, I was introduced to the Red Rising series written by Pierce Brown. **SLIDE** Has anyone else read it or at least heard of it? Well, I highly recommend the series, as it is a story that immediately hooks you in and leads you on a wild ride. In fact, I read all 6 of the books within a few weeks and could not get enough of it. It is one of those page turners that is a bit hard to describe, both because you don't want to spoil it for others and there is so much depth to the story and characters. My way of recommending it to others is that it's like hunger games, but in outer space. Of course, it is much more than that, but maybe that can help you get a general idea of its vibe.

I find it interesting how so many people in my life have now read the Red Rising series or are actively working their way through it. It was only a few months ago that I heard about it for the first time, even though Red Rising was published back in 2014. Now, it feels like everyone I know is reading it. Let me share how this has transpired... My circle was first introduced to the series by our friend Ben, who got my older brother Brad to read it. Brad got hooked and then convinced my little brother's fiancé Colleen and I to start it, which led to my little brother Corey having to read it so he could be in the loop. As we worked our way through the series, we began sharing the books we had already finished with other friends who were interested and soon they couldn't stop either. When I visited my parents over July 4th weekend, I made my dad listen to the audiobook and he just sent a text this week that he finished the series and gave his thoughts on it all. Then, at staff meeting on Tuesday, Pastor Emily herself said she has begun reading it at our recommendation. Now, you too have the opportunity to read it so even more people around me get into the series!

But, in all seriousness, Red Rising is one of those stories that is hard to describe to someone who has never read it. As my friends and I have introduced new people to the book, each of us tells the story of what it is about in a different way. When I asked Brad how he would describe it, he said, "it's a story about oppression, racism, and classism." That is quite a bit different than my hunger games, outer space recommendation. Often, with long, compelling, and complicated stories there is so much to consider that it is hard to narrow down what they are truly about, especially to someone who has never heard about it before. Yet, in our Gospel passage this morning, we see Jesus do just that as he boils down all of the law and the prophets into two simple commandments. This is what we will explore in these next few minutes together. **Sermon Slide**

But, before we do that, let's ground ourselves in this moment and season. We find ourselves at the end of October with Halloween just a couple days away, which means that 2023 is nearing its end. Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas are on the horizon and will be here before we know it. At the church, we are standing at the precipice of a major shift as we welcome our new Director of Music and Organist Sam Gray who will launch us into a new season of music ministry. This week, we are also in the middle of our three-week generosity series, as we think about how giving is an integral part of our Christian faith. In 2024, our church is challenging ourselves to step up our giving as a response to the many blessings we receive from our Lord.

Today's lectionary passages get us back to the core of our faith and beliefs. They are a great reminder of who we are as God's beloved children and why we are called to be generous to our core. So, let's start with the Gospel passage and see what it has to teach us.

The context of this passage from Matthew is very interesting. We heard Bob describe how a group of Pharisees approached Jesus with a desire to test him. Pausing for a moment, it is important to note that the Pharisees were a Jewish sect back in Jesus' time who were all about the Law and the Torah. They were the lawyers of their day, who spent the majority of their time reading, grappling with, and living out all that the Torah commanded. These Pharisees were like modern-day lawyers who specialize in certain areas of the Law- like personal injury or employment. Yet, their field was the first five books of our Bible called the Torah. When it came to questions about these scriptures, the Pharisees usually couldn't be stumped. This made it all the more impressive when Jesus left them speechless.

Recall how a small group of these Pharisees went to Jesus and asked him a question about the Torah. They said, **"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"** This appears to be a simple question on the surface, but it is one that they could trap most people with. You see, the Torah has 5,852 verses and doesn't definitively say what is the greatest commandment of all. We might immediately think of the 10 commandments, but there really isn't a hierarchy there as each of them hold great importance. Since the Pharisees knew the Law or the Torah very well, I imagine that they had a number of retorts planned for any answer that Jesus gave.

However, Jesus knew the Torah inside and out just as these Pharisees did. So, he chose a passage that most adequately answered their question and has become the foundation of what we believe as Christians. Jesus responded... **(Deuteronomy 6:5) "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."** This is the greatest and first commandment according to Jesus. We can see that the verse comes from the book of Deuteronomy. It is not part of the ten commandments, as those are found in chapter 5 of Deuteronomy. Instead, Jesus is quoting a commandment that came from God to Moses, who relayed it to the Jewish people as they established their identity and beliefs after escaping from captivity. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Simply put, Love God.

Jesus could have stopped there after solving their riddle with a great answer, but he was cooking and chose to give one more for good measure. He continued, **"And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."** In this second answer, I believe Jesus showed off his knowledge a bit to the Pharisees. Jesus chose to quote from Leviticus, which is a book that many people try to avoid. When we were reading through the Bible as a congregation a few years ago, we encouraged congregants to just skim through Leviticus. This was because not all of us like to read about the intricacies of grain offerings, depending on whether or not they are prebaked in an oven. But, if that excites you, then check out chapter 2. Leviticus can honestly be a slog at times, but this is because it's written for priests who were performing different rituals and tending to legal and moral matters. It is thus surprising that Jesus chose to select the second most important commandment from it.

In chapter 19 of Leviticus, there is a section dedicated to listing many of the laws of the Torah. We see the ten commandments reiterated here, and then in verse 18 it says... **(Leviticus 19:18) "'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."** Jesus quotes the second half of a sentence in the middle of the book of Leviticus as the second most important command. That is quite impressive and shows how intimately Jesus knew the scriptures. The second command follows the first and simply put, it is to love people.

When tested by the Pharisees long ago, Jesus offered these two answers that have become the foundation of the church and Christian faith. If we were to boil down what it is that we believe as Christ followers to someone who has never heard about Christianity or wants to know more, there is perhaps no better way to summarize it than love God, love people. These are the two commandments that Jesus elevates in a long, compelling, and complicated story that is the Bible and our faith. **SERMON SLIDE**

Yet, I wonder how often this message gets conveyed to our world. I wonder if this is what we share with others when we talk about what our faith boils down to... Or as Pastor Emily put it last week, would there be enough evidence to convict you of believing and following these two commandments of Jesus?

Often, I find that the messages, beliefs, or headlines about Christianity can stray pretty far from who we are called to be as Christ followers. This makes it all the more important that we share the Good News that comes from Jesus and help others experience the love that comes from God as we have. Jesus' two commandments bring about a world that I believe everyone wants to be a part of. A world where love prevails and suffering, war, and division are no more. I yearn for the world to be this way, but right now we can feel so viscerally that there is so much work to do. Would there be enough evidence to convict you of loving God and loving people?

Tying all of this back into our season of generosity- we know now what two commandments we are called to follow. This means that in everything we do, we are challenged to hold these as the pillars that we live by. In our daily interactions with others, in our professions, schools, or fields, in our moments when we are alone, and in our finances, we are called to love God and love people. In all of these areas of our lives, are we truly doing both of these things? And if not, how might these next two weeks be an opportunity for us to realign as we look forward to and plan out our year ahead.

Our faith calls us to give generously back to the God who provides everything for us and brings about all things. The Psalmist beautifully speaks to this in saying, **“Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and prosper for us the work of our hands— O prosper the work of our hands!”** When we stop and pause from the busyness of our lives, we remember that everything that we have and all that we are comes from God. God created us and the world, so it only makes sense that we should give thanks and praise to the Lord. What does the Lord require of us in return? Simply to love God and love people.

SERMON SLIDE So how might you step up to giving in this season ahead? How might we ensure that every aspect of our lives aligns with the call to love God and love people? How do you feel called to take action on these commands as we look ahead to 2024?

I'll end with a final thought. We are constantly sharing recommendations with friends and family about books to read, places to eat, and movies to watch. Yet, when it comes to sharing about our faith, we might be hesitant or not know where to start. Jesus made this a bit simpler for us and gave us a quick summary of our faith. Christianity is all about loving God and loving people. We might not always get it right and we might lose our way, but together this is what we strive for as a community. We can spend a lifetime pursuing these two simple commandments with our whole lives, but it is a worthy endeavor as we look to our world that is in desperate need of more love. So, how might we love God and love people more this week and into the future? Let's continue to explore that together. Amen.