

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 10:12-21
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Doing Love

Fr. Keith and I are playing “family tag” this week. Jess and I were gone for a few days last week visiting our son and his family in Tuscaloosa and this week Keith is having some family time as well, as all his kids *plus* the new grandbaby, are visiting — a full crowd at the Oglesby house!

I was anxious to get back to Tuscaloosa. We had made a dash to Alabama in late August when our youngest granddaughter Mae was born and I really wanted to spend some time with our now 8-week old granddaughter and her big 2 1/2-year-old brother, Dylan.

Like babies do, Mae is quickly becoming her own person. She’s begun to figure out her days and nights and she has no problem clearly letting you know what she needs — when it’s time for a diaper change or that she’s hungry — but unlike any of our other grandchildren, Mae also lets you know when she’s had enough holding-time and she’s ready to stretch out in her own bed.

I so loved sitting to watch Mae as she slept. My heart overflowed with love and hope — that deep desire to protect her, knowing I would do anything I can for her health and happiness, and a yearning for Mae to have a full and complete life, wrapped in joy. . . a grandparent’s silent prayer.

That time watching Mae made very real for me that love is NOT simply an emotion, some warm and fuzzy feeling. There’s so much more to love — to doing love. And that’s what I hear as Moses teaches the people of Israel in today’s reading from Deuteronomy, found within the 6th chapter of The Path — how to do love.

God’s covenant people have faced the struggles and trials of the wilderness years and are finally nearing the time to enter the Promised Land. This new generation needs to get ready for a more settled way of life with different day-to-day challenges and temptations. Moses knows he won’t go with them into the Promised Land, so it’s important to prepare the people for their new life. They need to understand that dedicating themselves to loving God means doing, means living in obedience and keeping God’s law.

First, Israel must listen. Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

This is the *Shema*. *Shema* is the Hebrew word for “hear” or “listen” and it refers to this specific verse. The *Shema* is so important to the faith, that it was traditionally recited by every Jewish man, woman, and child at the start and end of each day. No other single verse from the entire Torah would be known better than this one.

Listen Israel. Listen to the first commandment.

Love your God with everything. Not just with how you feel . . . some kind of a soft, emotional, starry-eyed kind of love . . . but with your whole being — in what you do and what you don't do — for true love, a complete love, is embodied. It is on your heart and in your mind and with you, always. It is a love that is so much a part of your daily life that you're compelled to talk about it, to share it, and to live it out in all that you do. This kind of love redefines who you are, for it is the core of our identity. Love God with everything.

Moses is teaching about love as doing: complete devotion and obedience.

Obedience. This may be an uncomfortable word in our modern and independent lives, perhaps carrying the taint of a blind and unthinking loyalty that could rub against our grain. But if we're honest with ourselves, how would we actually demonstrate our deepest and most profound love? With pithy sayings that reflect the fleeting emotions of the moment, saccharine words without substance? Or rather by consistently demonstrating our love by what we actually do or don't do. Moses reminds us that to love the Lord means that we walk the walk even when the path is tough and we, at times, will feel as if we're going it alone, separated from the cultural norms that surround us.

For what God expects from us, requires from us, are circumcised hearts — hearts that are transformed and changed. Hearts that are turned away from focusing on ourselves, turned away from our human stubbornness, rivalry, and the need to set ourselves against one another and instead turned towards God. Hearts that lead us to show our love of God through compassion to the stranger and seeking justice for the orphan, the widow and the oppressed.

As Christians, this message of living into God's love should sound so familiar, for we hear it in Jesus' words within all the Synoptic Gospels. We heard it today in the gospel reading from Matthew, as Jesus responds to a test about the greatest commandment.

Jesus, a faithful Jew, quotes the *Shema* and adds a quote from Leviticus. Jesus teaches what Moses taught, reinforcing what God requires of his followers: to love God and love our neighbor, fulfilling the essence, the Spirit of the all the Torah, all the law.

If we simply say this by rote, repeating it unthinkingly — Love God and love your neighbor — it may sound pretty easy. "Church talk" — words we simply say together.

But if we're committed to living out God's call to love, if we're intentional in leaning into doing, we can get uncomfortable pretty quickly, whether we're engaged in something big or simply doing our best to live out our day-to-day lives.

Doing love means being present for one another, not just in times of joy but in times of pain, grief, and loss, when there aren't any easy answers or quick fixes, and perhaps all you can really do is share God's love by being there, close at hand, sharing in the pain.

Doing love is being willing to speak out for injustice. Whether it's stepping in when you see someone being bullied or having the courage to say that those sexist, racist, or hate-filled comments and jokes just aren't okay. It's doing the hard and uncomfortable work of not being silent, for we are called to respect the dignity of every human being.

Doing love means being willing to listen to voices that are different than our own, who disagree with us on fundamental issues and challenge our perspectives, for it's only by being open to hearing these voices that we can come to understand other points of view. And this is particularly important for those of us in the majority, as our lives will never really allow us to fully understand the life experiences of those who are perceived as other.

A few of us went on pilgrimage yesterday to Athens, an event organized by the Beloved Community, our Diocesan Commission for Dismantling Racism. We participated in dedicating a memorial to remember the 56 souls and those who remain unknown, who were lynched in and around Athens from 1870 - 1964 . . . 56 African-American brothers and sisters. During the dedication, we lifted up each person's name in prayer — martyred men, women, and children — not to cause shame or place blame, but in recognition that the hard work of healing can only begin when we look at the facts of our history, recognize how those truths are connected to our world today, and acknowledge there is still much work to be done before there is liberty and justice for all. Sacred listening, intentionally seeking compassionate understanding of those we treat as other, with God's help, can help us move together towards healing, reconciliation, and peace.

Hear, O Israel.

Doing love means having the courage to not simply talk of love, but to put love into action. We do this by putting God first: by relying on God, not ourselves; by serving, rather than being served; by embracing hard truths and striving for justice and equity for all God's beloved people.

Are we willing to listen, to hear? How will we respond to God's call? How will you live into doing love? Amen.