### “Whose Son Is He?” Steve Finlan for The First Church, October 29, 2023

**Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18**

1The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. . .

15 You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. 16You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone . . . 18You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

**Matthew 22:34–46**

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” 43He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,44 ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? 45If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” 46No one was able to give him an answer.

We are here to learn about love and truth. I see lots of love in the interaction between people in this congregation, and in the energy for volunteering to help with church activities. Still, we need to return to our foundational documents and what they say about love.

Leviticus gives wonderful details about loving. Don’t be partial to either the rich or the poor, but be fair. Don’t go around slandering people. Don’t hate someone in your heart. Don’t take vengeance or bear a grudge. Don’t profit by the blood of your neighbor, which might mean seizing their land after their death.

Jesus gives a brilliant response to the trap question about the greatest commandment. He draws out that passage from Leviticus and another one from Deuteronomy, to deliver the dual love command: love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Note that loving with the mind is part of the commandment. We do not leave our intellects at the door when we enter the church. In fact, our minds should be energized to study and learn more about our faith tradition and hear the stories of its apostles and founders.

What does loving God with all your *soul* mean? It probably means that your whole moral nature and your whole creative nature are involved in the quest for God. So it’s not just that our minds should be gathering knowledge, but our moral nature should be gathering truth, and our creative nature finding ways to express our spiritual love. Soul growth comes from cooperation with God. It is the result of partnership with God. Soul growth results from the working partnership between the perfect God and your imperfect but deeply meaningful creative energies. *God finds you interesting*, and there is something of your uniqueness, your imagination, and your affections that goes into making up your soul. The poet John Keats, responding to the idea of the world as a vale of suffering, wrote, “call the world, if you please, ‘the vale of soul-making.’ Then you will find out the use of the world.” That last bit means that we make use of the world in our creative efforts that lead to soul growth.

So we have these teachings about love. Right after stating the love commandment, Jesus asks them if the Messiah is David’s son, and he uses the language of Psalm 110 to show that David calls the Messiah “Lord,” therefore the Messiah cannot be son of David, for nobody in that culture would call his son “Lord.” A father was always considered greater than his son, and no father would call his son “Lord.” The Messiah, therefore, cannot be David’s son, but must be somebody greater than David.

Why would that matter? It is because Jesus wanted to get them to stop thinking nationalistically. “David’s son” was a nationalistic and militaristic Messiah concept, and he wanted to pry them loose from such materialistic thinking. In Luke 4, when Jesus announces the beginning of his mission, he uses a very different Old Testament concept, the idea of someone anointed with the spirit and empowered to liberate captives, uplift the poor, and heal the blind (Luke 4:18; Isa 61:1–3; 35:5). This anointed figure from Isaiah is a spiritual prophet. Of the three main Messiah ideas in circulation among the Jews—Messiah as a new king, Messiah as a new priest, Messiah as a new and spiritual prophet—Jesus definitely favored the last one, and did what he could to highlight that idea. The prophets promoted the supreme values of justice, love, righteousness, and knowledge of God, and they were open to including the Gentiles within the community. The temple was to be a “house of prayer for all peoples” said Isaiah, and this was affirmed by Jesus during his cleansing of the temple (Isa 56:7; Mark 11:17).

He wanted to be understood as a spiritual teacher and deliverer, not a political or military deliverer. This also fits with the idea of loving God and loving one’s neighbors. He wanted them to see him as a spiritual Messiah, even a prophet of love.

If we really understand Jesus, we will see him as the Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace, who will some day establish “endless peace” (Isa 9:6–7), for he came to change the world, to win people over to being voluntary cooperators and partners with God.

This lesson still applies for us, today. The Messiah’s mission was and is a spiritual one, to create a worldwide family of those who seek to do God’s will and who are empowered to live in peace. Anyone who seeks to assert the dominance of one nation over others has fallen back to the old concept of the Messiah as David’s son, as a nationalist warrior. The enlightened disciples of Jesus understand the spiritual and international emphasis, the openness to all who are willing to live for God.

Our answer to Jesus’ question, “the Messiah, whose son is he?” would be “God’s son. We believe in a divine Messiah, the son of God, who is also the creator of this very world and of the human race.”

If we are loyal to Jesus’ spirit, then we are open to all races and nationalities. Our UCC Statement of Faith says that the Holy Spirit binds together “in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races” ([www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/statement-of-faith](http://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/statement-of-faith)). Openness to all nationalities is an important moral principle. We see it practiced by volunteer groups that seek to minister to the health needs of civilians in war zones, without showing any national or political favoritism. There also are human rights groups that advocate for an end to torture, unfair trials, and suppression of freedom of speech everywhere in the world, whether in leftist Venezuela, rightist Russia, or in large or small nations around the world.

I’ll end with a little story. In 1947, as the Brooklyn Dodgers were in Cincinnati to start their second road series of the season, Jackie Robinson was being relentlessly booed and heckled as he went out to field his position at first base. Before they resumed play, the shortstop Pee Wee Reese left his position, went over to first and put his arm around the shoulders of his black teammate. The heckling ceased and there was silence in the stands. They knew that Reese was from their neighboring state of Kentucky, and this unexpected show of solidarity astonished the Cincinnati crowd. Jackie Robinson batted .297 that season, hit 31 doubles and led the league with 29 stolen bases and 28 sacrifice hits. He also played in all seven games of the World Series that year, hitting two doubles and stealing two bases. But it was the mutual respect and support shown by Robinson and Reese that enabled Jackie to have a career and the Dodgers to be a successful team, with six trips to the World Series during Robinson’s career, including the Dodger victory in 1955.

Of course, it’s just baseball, but for a moment it was also the gospel in action. Maybe there are opportunities for us to extend the hand of friendship, or to put our arms around those who can be our allies in the quest for dignity, love, and peace. We might have more potential allies than we realize, and we will find them if we put spiritual qualities first, if we love our neighbors, and follow the Prince of Peace.