

*Spiritual DNA*  
*Matthew 22:34-46*  
*25 October 2020*  
*Sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae*

Several years ago at the AGO there was an art exhibit called “Before and After the Horizon”, it was all about the importance of place and worldview, about remembering our identity and how the land upon which we live, how place impacts us. While the exhibit was an expression of the journey of the Anishinaabe people, it really spoke about the human journey, and for me, the faith journey in particular. It reminded me of how faith stories from so many centuries ago can still be relevant in this every changing world of ours today, and about the struggle to hold on to what is most important, even when the world around us is sending us different messages.

Connection to place can be so strong. If you have ever returned to an ancestral homeland, or walked down the lane way of a great grandparents farm you may understand what I mean. Place has a way of reminding us who we are, and bringing us in line with what it is we are called to do and to be. The church does too.

This place, our church, does too. And that is just one of the reasons this pandemic has been so hard on us. We were cut off from

our physical houses of worship for so long. And even now today, not all of us can be together physically. Our sense of place has been shaken, and we have had to create virtual place, which we are, but it is like learning a whole new language, relating to virtual space. But hopefully we are learning. I hope, whether we walk through the doors here or when we log on to the service from the safety of our living rooms, we feel a sense of connection, to our faith, to others ... that we are able to be reminded of who we are as people of faith in a world turned upside down, and I hope that however we connect, that act of joining together strengthens us to live out our faith, reminding us who we are, whatever the week ahead may bring.

Today's scripture is all about identity. It is like a wake up call for challenging days, a reminder of our Spiritual DNA if you will, of who we are and who we are called to be as disciples. It is a concise teaching about living a life of faith, a realignment to get us back on track when the world has thrown us off with distractions. It cuts to the chase, and in the simplest terms possible reminds us what a life of discipleship looks like.

Which is just what we need, because I don't know about you but lately it has felt like the world is a bit of a powder keg. We are all

a bit on edge and it is easy to get distracted and forget what is most important. We watch our neighbours to the south preparing for their election and we hear so much anger on both sides, so much frustration. Race relations are so strained. We like to think we have it together here in Canada, but a look at the news tells us we don't as the fisheries of the Micmaw are set ablaze and opportunities are not equal. We worry about rising covid numbers and the economy. There is just so much "us vs them". And it all can get a little overwhelming. It is so easy to turn inward, to focus only on self protection, to self isolate our hearts along with our bodies. But then we get a passage like this today, an opportunity to get back to basics, and be reminded who we are, and whose we are. An opportunity to be set spiritually back on course.

We are followers of Jesus. And this discipleship comes with incredible gifts – salvation, hope, strength, new life – but it also comes with certain expectations, expectations that don't change when our setting changes, that don't change when the world around us changes. Like the DNA that makes us who we are as human beings, there are certain expectations that make up our spiritual DNA, instructions Jesus gave us, as disciples, that never change.

Love the Lord your God.

Love your neighbour.

With those two in place, the rest will fall into line.

Doesn't sound too hard, really, does it? But who are we kidding, it depends on the day. The good news is that a spiritual life is a life in progress. Coming to church, being here, physically or virtually, being a part of community, is a chance to commit to learning and growing in discipleship. So first off, none of us follow these commandments of Jesus perfectly, but hopefully all of us are trying, or wanting to try.

So let's look at the first one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. Now, some of you may be lifelong Christians, and while you may at times struggle with your faith you can say with certainty that you love God. And live like you do. No matter how difficult life around you gets you have faith that you are not alone and that God's love surrounds you. And it is easy for you to love God in return. Some of you may not be there yet. Some may have doubts, some may experience things in life that pile on top of your and make you feel distant from God. Some may look at the world and wonder where God is in this. While you may come here

with a desire to know God, a longing for peace and hope, but that relationship is a new one. And that is ok. Whether you are a long time Christian or a seeker, we come here, to this community to be together, to be encouraged, to be reminded, of God's faithfulness to God's children, and we try again to grow in trust, to love God with all our hearts, our souls and mind.

But Jesus' great commandment did not stop at loving God. This isn't all inner work, o no, Jesus calls us to take that love and go into the world. We're to love our neighbours as ourselves, he tells us. Now that is a challenge, because let's be honest, that is likely easier with some neighbours more than others. But Jesus didn't distinguish between neighbours ... he didn't just mean the easy ones, the ones who rake your leaves for you or bring you over some extra pumpkin bread they made. He also meant the ones who are different from us, the ones who put up a political sign you don't support, who has a bumper sticker that makes your blood boil, the one who parks over the end of your driveway, who puts their own needs first all the time ... the one who abuses their partner.

Love your neighbour as yourself, Jesus said. All of them.

It is hard to love our neighbours. But in this world today, with so much division and anger and hate, if we are ever going to be whole again, if we are ever going to be healthy again, that is exactly what we must do.

But what does that mean, what does that really mean, to love our neighbour, all of them? Well it doesn't mean we have to agree with them, first off. Agreement does not equal love. But it does mean we need to consider them. And more than that we need to care for them, care about them, in the context of God's love. As tensions in our world increase, I think loving our neighbour means praying for those we have disagreements with, praying for those carrying anger (which may even include yourself). It means knowing that it is possible, even if you have no idea how, for God to reconcile people, God's love can move us all to live from a place of love rather than hate, can build bridges between and heal generations of hurts that have been caused by actions and inactions.

And even if we struggle to feel love in our hearts for specific neighbours, loving our neighbours also means caring about creation. Because we need to care about all our neighbours, and our global neighbourhood, like we would care for ourselves. Because we need

things like food and compassion and shelter, loving our neighbours means sharing what we have and making decisions, or pushing for decisions that are for the good of all, not just ourselves. It means making sure our resources are used and shared appropriately. It means caring for our environment so there is a clean, healthy and sustainable planet for the children in our community, and for their children and their grandchildren. It is about trying to see the world as God intends it, and our relationships as God intends them, and then trying to live toward that. ... It means reminding ourselves every day who we are (beloved children of God) who are called to live from a place of love and peace and hope. That is our worldview, impacted by this place.

This place. This place that reminds us not only of how much God loves us, and all God's children, but which also reminds us of the work we are called to do as disciples in this imperfect world. That is what this is all about – that is what church is all about. Learning to love God so much that we invite God in to our lives to transform us and help us be more – more generous, more aware, more hopeful, more welcoming. And learning to love others, even those who are different from us, learning to be in community, welcoming all, realizing

that we aren't in this alone and nor are we meant to be.

Remembering we are all worthy of love. And even more than that, remembering that we are called to live *knowing* that we are all worthy of love.

When we call ourselves Christian, not only are we reminded of our inherent worthiness in God's eyes, but we are challenged to live in a way that reflects what and who we are. We are challenged to go beyond saying "I AM Christian", as in, "this is a label I like to apply to myself" to saying "I live a life with Christ at the centre". I live a life where my decisions are influenced by Christ, the way I treat people is influenced by Christ, the welcome I extend is influenced by Christ .... I seek to love, to include, to make room for the other, to strive for justice, to reconcile and make new ... because that is what Christ taught me, and I live with Christ at the centre".

It isn't easy, this life of faith. And these instructions from Jesus today in this scripture, are not easy. They were never meant to be. And in a world filled with division and fear, they get even harder. But with the love and power of God, and the encouragement and strength of others in our faith family, we will find our way. And bit by bit, through each prayer and each action, we can re-write the story of our



world and replace division with reconciliation, fear with hope and hate with love. That is why we are here. Thanks be to God.