

My earliest memory of the summary of the law, which is the formal name for Jesus' answer to the Pharisees in this morning's Gospel, is embedded in a particular place: St. Augustine-by-the-Sea in Santa Monica. Not the cream-colored sixties-style contemporary edifice that now faces out onto Fourth Street, just below Wilshire; but the original church, that burned in 1966. The red brick and wooden frame building, with its rich, dark wainscoting and pews, deep jewel-toned stained-glass windows and red carpet.

St. Augustine's, where I, along with maybe 100 other children, in blue-and-white-checked uniforms, would walk, our hands clasped behind our backs, to chapel during the week; where I stood in a choir stall on Sundays: where I first fell in love with what the psalmist calls "the beauty of holiness."

Every other Sunday, at the beginning of the service of Holy Communion, the elaborately vested priest would say "Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." And immediately afterwards, we would sing "Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, Lord have mercy upon us."^[i]

I knew what our Lord Jesus Christ saith by heart. I didn't really understand what the words meant; but I loved their rhythm: "all thy heart, all thy soul, all thy mind...". And then there was that weird bit: "hang all the law and the Prophets". Hang-all-the-law was one long polysyllabic word.

Every single person present in the temple that day that Matthew describes for us in his twenty-second chapter would have, in the same way, known at least the first part of Jesus' response to the lawyer's question by heart. It is called the Shema (which is actually the first word of it, "hear", in Hebrew). The foundational creed of Judaism found in the book of Deuteronomy, recited by pious Jews every day: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." And the second command that Jesus said was "like unto it", to love one's neighbor as oneself, though buried in a long passage on holiness in Leviticus, was also deeply familiar.^[ii]

Yet I imagine not a one, not even Jesus himself, could possibly have foreseen that two thousand years later his distillation of the Torah's 613 individual commands into just two: love God and love your neighbor, would be not only known by heart by practicing Christ-followers, but also pretty widely embraced in the broader culture. Culture that is largely "spiritual but not religious". Because most people can get on board with this

idea that all God really requires is that we love. No long, painful list of “don’ts” that can so easily get us into trouble and fights. Just one monumental “do”. Love. All we need is love.

Now, throughout the centuries, countless philosophers and theologians have delved into *why* loving God and our neighbor is the prescription for a good, righteous life. Why it is that upon which everything else “hangs”. And they have insisted that you can’t really do one without the other. You can’t love God without loving your neighbor, and vice versa. And they have explored the ways in which this leads to salvation, however that may be defined. As if we all have a choice as to whether or not we love.

But what if we don’t? Have a choice, I mean. What if opting out of loving isn’t possible? What if the real issue here is not *whether* you and I are going to love, with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, but rather *what*, or *who*, we will love with all that we are?

James K. A. Smith, who teaches philosophy at Calvin College, and who, by the way, is on board to be our Stern Lecturer next year, is convinced that this is in fact *the real question*. Because, he insists, we can’t help ourselves! We cannot NOT love. In his book *You are What You Love*, he argues that the heart, that seat of our deep desire, that place from which we want, we crave, we yearn and we seek, the heart is, in fact, what drives everything. He calls it “the epicenter of the human person”. You and I may *think* that we are making our choices and determining our actions with our brains. But we aren’t. We are doing that with our hearts. ^[iii]

Now, trust me when I tell you, there is nothing anti-intellectual, anti “thinking” in Smith’s argument. Not at all. He is just convinced that Descartes’ assertion that “I think, therefore I am” is misguided anthropology. Smith calls it “thinking thing”ism. Because we are “thinking things”, our minds are “mission control”. Our brains are where knowledge is deposited, where rational decisions are made, and where behaviors in accordance with them are chosen.

But that’s not really the way humans work, Smith says. And what we really need is to embrace a more holistic, biblical model of human persons that situates our intellectual thinking and knowing in relation to more fundamental aspects of human being. A model that takes into account the origins, and the shaping, of the desires and commitments of our hearts. The origins, and the shaping, of our *loves*. These are what really guide our lives.

Now Smith’s argument is way more complex than I can do justice to in this sermon. I have definitely over-simplified. And on first blush, you may not be inclined to necessarily agree with him. But he makes two pretty compelling arguments for this idea

that the heart is the epicenter of human identity; and that what we give our hearts to will determine the trajectory of our lives. What we love will direct our paths.

First, he argues from our faith tradition. From our Scriptures, which tell us that the pure in heart, not the pure in mind, are blessed;^[iv] which enjoin us to lift up our hearts; which counsel us to “above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it”. (Proverbs 4:23). And from our great minds, like Augustine of Hippo, who famously wrote in his *Confessions*, “You [God] have made us for yourself, and our *heart* is restless until it rests in you”.^[v]

And second, Smith argues from our lived experience. From the striking dissonance that often exists between what we have decided, with our minds, that we should want, or do, and what we actually end up doing. Who hasn’t figured out the perfect plan on Monday only to find themselves completely lost, again, on Tuesday? Who hasn’t experienced the gap between “head knowledge” and “heart knowledge”? Who hasn’t realized that knowing the right answer does not necessarily guarantee the right outcome? As they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, “your best thinking got you here”.

Smith’s solution is to pay much more attention to what is going on with our hearts. To apply our whole selves to an investigation of this “fulcrum of our most fundamental longings”. To ask ourselves not “shall I love?” but “what are the objects of my love? What do I want to love? What or who shall I give my heart to?” Smith calls this process of reflection “curating our hearts”.

And it seems to me, it’s another way of applying the idea of getting to know something *by heart*. That process of interiorization that so often happens over time, with repetition, hearing something, or doing something, something important, something beautiful, something life-giving, something of God, over and over again until it becomes part of you. Though we may not understand as fully as one day by God’s grace we might, still the desire is becoming embedded in the core of our being.

Jesus says that if you and I turn our hearts toward the God who is love, and the neighbor that God loves, and through whom God’s love is so often made known to us, then we have done all we need to do. Everything else will fall into place. Everything will hang in proper alignment.

Now, this is probably one of those sermons that raises more questions than it answers. And I think that is a good thing. My hope is that you and I will leave this place just a bit more curious about toward what, toward whom, the epicenter of *this* human turns. That we might ask ourselves, “Where is *this* heart directed? What is *my* deepest desire?

What have I already learned, what do I already know ‘by heart’? And then finally,
“What, or who, is God inviting me to love? To what is God calling me to give my heart?

Remember, we cannot *not* love. May we, by God’s grace, learn to love well.

[i] The 1928 Book of Common Prayer http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1928/HC_1928.pdf.

[ii] Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18.

[iii] James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press 2016), 1-10.

[iv] Matthew 5:8.

[v] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1.1.1.