“Teacher, Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

This was the last testing question in Matthew’s gospel.

The person asking was a lawyer, an expert in the law, a professional theologian, someone who was absolutely steeped in the laws of Moses, and he asked a simple question. When you have 613 commandments to follow, it’s helpful to know which ones take priority.

But asking to pinpoint one law brought about the risk of alienating those who had a different opinion. For example, if I asked you what the greatest, most influential band of the 20th century was. You would probably say The Beatles.

But even if most would agree, picking one band would expose you to potential debate, especially if I asked you the question at a Rolling Stones concert. You’d be opening yourself up to debate on hostile ground.

And Jesus did not have the most charitable of conversation partners. They noticed how he was swaying the hearts of the people, they were anxious, they wanted to shut this down. So, if they asked him which was the greatest, even if he was right and said the Beatles they could come in with “but what about the

Stones, how can you not mention Led Zepplin, you completely glossed over Pink Floyd." In holding up one out of many he would alienate the fans of the other bands, the other laws.

So, they ask him this question, a question with a commonly agreed upon answer. And Jesus answers with the most familiar text. It comes from the Shema, which was recited twice a day (and still is) by observant Jews. They were the words that were literally written on people's doorposts, on their arms, on their foreheads. [1]

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,"

And then he adds a second. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Which is from Leviticus. He gives them two laws **that they know well.** Laws that they would say they agreed with, and followed.

In choosing these laws, Jesus was not persuading them to accept something novel. He didn't offer a deep cut from the Torah. What Jesus was doing, was playing a song that they knew well but had begun to sing off key.

[1] Deut 6:5. Written in the boxes on their phylacteries.

Jesus was giving them a pitch on the organ because the song that they were singing was drifting away from the point.

Sometimes the words that are the hardest for us to sit with, and stay in tune with, are the ones we think we know the best. “Yes, yes, We all know the Golden Rule, we got it, so let’s just keep moving.” And yet sometimes, there grows a gap between our *knowing* and *our doing.*

I’m in my car a lot these days, and when my kids are with me, we listen to the radio. And it seems to me, like every radio station cycles through the same 6 songs. They play them to death.
I can identify one of these songs in the first couple of seconds, and even if it’s a pretty good song, I’ll switch it to something else, because I’m tired of listening to it again and again. Sometimes music becomes so familiar that it no longer inspires us to get up and dance or to sing along.

But at the same time, there are other songs, that no matter how many times we hear them, they ignite something in us. Our Desert Island Disc songs.

You know the ones, that if dropped on an island, you'd take them with you and be delighted to listen to them over and over. Maybe they're the songs you skated to in middle school, the ones your mom sang when she was folding laundry, or the one that you danced to at your wedding. They're the songs that formed us, that captured moments in time, and that we come back to again and again throughout our lives.

When we hear, "**love** the lord your god, **love** your neighbor as yourself" We might be tempted to respond like we do when an overplayed song comes on the radio. It's overplayed, We know it, we're not inspired to sing along anymore.

But **these** words are not to be glossed over.

They're like the songs that compel us back to the dance floor, that speak to the heart of who we are. Everything else hangs on them. Yes, they're familiar, but like a text that we come to again and again, there's always something to discover, to experience afresh.

That's what these commandments are. They're the songs that we're called to sing throughout the whole of our lives. When we hear them they're to bring us straight to our feet. To get up and run to the dance floor. Because ***love*** ought to bring us to our feet.

Theres movement in love. **It's not** something we know or feel, it's something we **do**.

The contemplative Thomas Merton wrote that 'Love affects more than our thinking and our behavior toward those we love.
It transforms our entire life. Genuine love is a
personal revolution."

Loving God transforms us, it shapes us, it is our core, our foundation; but it is not the end. Our love for God is to flow through us to one another. We are to love our neighbors.
For if our love for God does not translate into love for neighbors—those near and far. Or, even worse, if our love of God prevents us from loving neighbors. That is not love, but is a façade designed to cover up our indifference and hostility towards one another.

Jesus had already confronted the Pharisees on this. About how their emphasis on the sabbath laws showed their indifference to the hungry and the basic human need for food (Matthew 12:1-8).

It's not that the leaders failed to honor God's laws, rather that the rules become the focus and not the one who was being honored by the rules. And We are not unlike the Pharisees. We can be

tempted in the same way, to take a good thing and prioritize it over the very God that it's meant to honor.

That doesn't mean we throw out the rules. The Beatles said "**all** you need is love," but that isn't quite what Jesus is saying. For as he said earlier in the gospel, he did not come to abolish laws but to fulfill them. Rather, Jesus is saying that all of the commandments **hinge** on love, that it's through love of God and neighbor that we are to interpret and apply all the other laws. [2]

Emphasizing the act of **Love** in the greatest commandment reminds us where the focus is.

"Love" is the pitch that we match so that we sing in tune with God. So that our worship and our living stay on key.

Loving God with the whole self, with "heart, and with soul, and with mind, and to love our neighbors: love like that isn't pop radio love. It is demanding and risky. Following the path of love, singing in the key of love, led Jesus into debates and conflicts, and into all kinds of situations that were not only uncomfortable, but dangerous. Eventually, love gets him killed.

[2] R. Mohrlang, Matthew 95.

It's that risky, costly, transforming love, that shapes us, that we receive from God and offer back to God; the love that flows through us to our neighbors.

Wendell Berry says this in his poem, *Sabbaths*.

I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love.

I have no love
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry
this candle against the wind.

I have no love except it come from thee. None of us have enough love of our own. So, what a blessing that none of us are on our own. We are part of a choir. The Gospel is our song, and love keeps us in tune.

We are called to sing the good news of Jesus to the world.

We **know** the words, now may we move from knowing to doing. May each and every one of us sing. May we sing Through our words and deeds. May we sing by serving those in need, may we sing by restoring communities through hospitality, may we sing by giving what we have and having faith that God will make up the difference. May we sing by being the hands and feet of the risen Christ in our world.

We know the words, we know the tune, we have our starting pitch, now let us sing.

In the name of God: Lover, Beloved, and Love itself. Amen.