

Hinges: Matthew 22: 34-40

Have you ever thought about how ubiquitous hinges are? Each and every door we walk through has hinges which allow for it to be opened and closed. Without the hinges, the door is useless—it won't work. Hinges are everywhere. I begin thinking about hinges when reading our gospel passage for this morning as it relates to the passage from Leviticus. The gospel passage begins with one of the Pharisees also a lawyer asking Jesus: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Notice he asks Jesus to pick one commandment from all those in the Law. And in true Jesus fashion, the response is not one, but two commandments which he proceeds to connect in verse 40. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Another way to translate the Greek here would be to substitute depend for hang. In other words according to Jesus, everything that God told Moses, everything that God told the people through the prophets...it all depends upon these two instructions. Loving God with all that you are and loving your neighbor as yourself. Do you see where I find the image of a hinge? The most common image we have of a hinge matches the first definitions which Webster's gives for it. These descriptions involve those pieces of plastic or metal which hold two things together. A later definition is that a hinge is anything upon which matters turn or depend; a cardinal point or principle; or a pivot. So if we look to our reading from the Law as found in the manual for the priests of the Lord we find verse 2 and 3: Speak to all the assembly of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." We then find a list of the ways to be holy in God's eyes. You are to keep the Sabbaths; revere your mother and father, do not turn to idols. Sounds like the commandments given at Mt. Sinai. But then we have some instructions about leaving gleanings of the harvest of grain and vine so that the poor and resident aliens may have them. Those are exactly found in the Exodus chapter listing the commandments Moses brought down from the mountain. Then it seems Leviticus returns to the themes of the Ten Commandments we are so familiar with; do not steal, but there is an addition—do not deal falsely. Do not lie to one another, do not swear falsely by the Lord's name—and again we hear do not steal or defraud your neighbor. Don't keep the wages of a laborer beyond the day of labor comes right after that second injunction not to steal as if withholding or delaying pay is a type of stealing. Then we have instructions about how to treat

those with disabilities—don't revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind. In this passage we have descriptions of behaviors which are harmful to individuals and which prevent a harmonious community life. Leviticus goes on to make pronouncements about justice—judgments shall be just without partiality or deference given to either the poor or the great. Another injunction is given against lying—this time paired with profiting by the misfortune of the neighbor, hating anyone of your kin, not taking vengeance or bearing a grudge against any of your people. All these things which the people were told not to do make quite a list of commandments—more than ten anyway in just this passage. But the passage itself concluded with one positive instruction: “but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It seems even in Leviticus all those instructions about all types of behaviors could be brought together by the one injunction to love. But the Pharisees didn't seem to appreciate reducing the many commandments in the Law. Instead, they were a rule oriented group of people who approached life and religion with the goal of obeying all the commandments in the Torah. For them, the very essence of religion was to obey the rules and regulations. There are 39 books in the Old Testament. According to a commentary I read in those 39 books, there are 613 rules—365 of them say you shall not, 248 say you shall. The Pharisees believed that each and every one of those rules was to be known and obeyed—equally. In their view Jesus had quite a large group from which to make a selection. As we have already discovered, the second commandment Jesus named came from Leviticus. The commandment Jesus termed the greatest came from Deuteronomy 6:4, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all you soul.” If Jesus had picked only the Deuteronomy law, “a thou shall” law and left it at that, the Pharisees would probably have agreed. But Jesus not only added a second commandment, he linked them. “On these two commandments hang or hinge all the law and the prophets—in other words—everything in the Bible. Under this interpretation those instructions not relating to how one lived in relationship with God and with others no longer mattered. Consider this, within the Old Testament, we have the stories of the creation, the flood, the covenant with Abraham, the story of Moses and the Exodus. We also have the books about the history of Israel and the word of the Lord as given to the prophets about how the Israelites lived out their covenant relationship. In the New Testament

we have the stories of Jesus and then the stories of the early church as it began to understand the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. But think about it, what would this knowledge mean without the two hinges of love which Jesus named as the two greatest commandment found in Scripture? If we know all the stories, but don't know how to connect them to each other and to our lives, then what do we gain from the knowledge? If we don't understand that relationship based on love is fundamental to these stories, how do they come alive in our lives. There are many people who have Biblical knowledge, but don't seem to really love God with all that they are, nor do they truly love their neighbors who are hurting. They have the door, so to speak. There are some people who think they only need the hinges: if they love God and neighbor that is all that is needed; to them all religions in the world can be reduced to the two hinges. I believe that you need both a door which represents knowledge of God and God's love for us and desire to claim us and the hinges which are our response of love to that knowledge. What did Jesus mean when he gave these two commandments as the basis for all of God's interactions with humankind? What does it mean to love God with all your heart, mind and soul and why is it so essential? To love God that way is to think of God morning, noon and night; to talk with God morning, noon and night; to make our whole life revolve around an awareness of God who is the center of our existence because we love God deeply. If we think of all the ways that God has been in our lives, the things God had given us and done for us because of God's gracious giving love for us—how can we not respond with a deep love for the One who gives so abundantly to us? The second hinge is often more of a problem for us. We often hear that love our neighbor as ourselves as really being to love our family that way. Or maybe we expand it to include our friends, or those with whom we go to church, or those in the community with whom we share interests. We tend to think of our neighbor as someone we know, someone a lot like us. Although Matthew does not record it, this same question is posed and answered the same way by Jesus in the gospel of Luke. In Luke, after receiving the answer which included the love your neighbor as yourself command, the lawyer then wanted Jesus to define neighbor. As you may remember, Jesus' response was to relate the parable of the Good Samaritan. The neighbors we are called upon to love are the people who are not like us, the people beaten up and downtrodden in our world, the people

who are poor, homeless, hungry or starving; who are in jail or on the streets because of addictions. All those people who make us uncomfortable we are called to love. All those people who seem so unlovable to us we are commanded to view as we view ourselves. Those are the ones Jesus calls for us to love. These two commandments are just that, the verbs are in the imperative tense—meaning we are to do them. We are not told to learn what they say. We are not asked to be able to recite them. Those are things that we have done probably since early in our childhood. No, we are told to go and do them. Love God. Love neighbor. These become two hinges which are functional when we place them within the story of God's love for us. It is through knowing the love of God for us which we find in the Biblical stories, the stories which include Jesus' teachings, the story of his life, death and resurrection; it is then that we are respond to this great love with love of our own for God. It is then that God becomes central to the way we live. It is when we place ourselves within the story of God's love for us that the Holy Spirit enables us to not only understand the teachings of Jesus but to then go and live them. Loving God and others did not lead Jesus into a life passive acceptance of others. Instead he acted to overthrow the moneychanger's tables in the Temple courtyard and challenged those whose too legalistic interpretations of God's will. Perhaps we need to consider where our understanding of God's word may have become too legalistic and lost the meaning of actually deeply being committed to loving God and loving neighbor. Amen.