

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Mark 12:28-34

SERMON SERIES: “Prayer: A Living Relationship”

SERMON TITLE: “Falling in Love”

Over the course of my last two sermons, we’ve been looking at prayer as a living relationship with God. We first looked at how prayer can help us get acquainted with God. We next talked about prayer as a means of becoming friends with God. And today the focus is on falling in love with God through prayer. I like the way author Richard Foster puts it: *Prayer is nothing more than an ongoing and growing love relationship with God.* (Foster, Richard. *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, p. 13.)

But first to our scripture story. Jesus is in Jerusalem. He’s created quite a stir by cleansing the Temple and now he’s being questioned by the leaders of Judaism including the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and even the Herodians. In this morning’s text, it’s a scribe who engages Jesus. So listen for the word of God. **Scripture story.**

Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

Imagine that! God desires our love. God commands our love.

And to be sure, this kind of love requires an act of the will--a decision--a commitment that’s not dependent on our feelings. In fact, the Greek word for love in this text is *agapao*. It denotes a love that is more an act of the will than it is a feeling. And this is a good thing because love like this can be directed at people we don’t feel anything for--people we don’t like very much--even our enemies.

But that’s not all there is to it. The commandment also makes clear that loving God involves the totality of who we are--heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our relationship with God may begin as an act of the will, but it’s not intended to end there. Growth is possible as we move from getting acquainted, to becoming friends, to even falling in love--which is a matter of the heart.

It’s no accident that the scriptures use the analogy of the deepest and most intimate

human relationships to describe the depths of love possible with God. In the Old Testament, for example, we find that the Song of Solomon--a sensual book that celebrates the sexual love between a man and a woman--has been interpreted for centuries as an allegory that describes the relationship of love between God and Israel.

Whenever the Hebrews spoke of “knowing” God, they used the word *yada*, which was a word also used in reference to sexual relationships: *to know a man, to know a woman*. It was not just an intellectual “knowing,” but an intimate, experiential “knowing.”

When Jesus spoke of the love required of his disciples, he pointed to the deepest and most intimate human relationships and he said, *love me more*. In Luke’s gospel, he even used hyperbole to make the point: *Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple*.

So do you see the point? Love for God necessarily involves a willful act of commitment, but God offers us an even deeper relationship than that. It is possible to fall personally, passionately and intimately in love with God.

Now let’s talk about prayer. Prayer is one of the ways we love God and fall in love with God. In fact, Richard Foster concludes that *To be effective pray-ers, we need to be effective lovers*. (Foster, Richard. *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, p. 3.)

Now how many of us have ever fallen in love? Well if we have, then we’ve been given a glimpse of what it’s like to fall in love with God through prayer.

Now believe it or not, I can actually remember what it was like to fall in love with Laura Jean. We met at church in the summer of 1975 and moved through those stages of getting acquainted and becoming friends. Our first date was in December of 1975.

And yes, we were attracted to one another. We enjoyed each other’s company. And then gradually, as we began to spend more time together, I noticed that I was thinking about her more and more, especially when we were apart. I longed to be with her. I missed her when we weren’t together. And I wanted to keep sharing my life with her in ever more intimate ways and

I wanted her to share her life with me.

Well, it became obvious that there was this bond developing between the two of us that was far deeper than anything I had experienced with anyone else in my life. I was falling in love with her. So in December of 1976, I asked her to marry me. She said yes. We were married on May 20, 1977 and we've been sharing our lives together ever since. And I'll be honest with you, I'm more in love with her today than I was on the day I married her.

So what does this have to do with God? Well, when we begin to long for a deeper and more intimate relationship with God; when we feel a growing attraction to God and greater enjoyment and peace when we meet God in prayer; when we find ourselves thinking more and more about God throughout the day; and when we miss God when we're not together--then I think it's safe to say that we are falling in love with God.

And when this happens, we'll usually find that words are no longer adequate to express what's in our hearts. The silence of simply being together with God in loving attentiveness will be enough. This is called contemplative prayer.

It's a prayer of stillness, for the psalmist said, *Be still and know that I am God*. It's a prayer of silence, for the prophet Zechariah said: *Be silent, all people, before the Lord*. It is a prayer of loving communion for Jesus said, *Abide in me as I abide in you*.

Now again, I think I can best illustrate what contemplative prayer is like by referring to my own relationship with Laura Jean. I make a point of saying to Laura Jean as frequently as I can without overdoing it, "I love you"--and that's a very good thing. But I must tell you, that there are times when we are together and just holding one another, or times when I'm just gazing at her while she's asleep, that the words "I love you" are simply not enough to express the depth and intimacy of our relationship. In fact, in those moments, the words just get in the way. I really do believe that it's in the silence of our being together that I come closest to experiencing the fullness of our relationship. As Catherine de Hueck Doherty says: *True silence is the speech of lovers. For only love knows its beauty, completeness, and utter joy*. (Doherty,

Catherine de Hueck. *Poustinia: Christian Spirituality of the East for Western Man.* p. 20.)

Now I've not mastered contemplative prayer in my own life, but I have had hints of it's beauty and power in those moments when I've felt very near to God. For example, when I was in Corpus Christi, I would take time away from my work and go to a place on the Kennedy Ranch down in Sarita, TX, called Lebh Shomea (that's a Hebrew phrase meaning *listening heart*). It's a house of prayer. Most of the time everyone at Lebh Shomea is in silence and this took some getting used to for me.

In fact, when I would go to Lebh Shomea, I would inevitably take a stack of books with me thinking that I would read a lot. It was a way of filling the silence.

And sure enough, when I arrived at Lebh Shomea, I would start reading a book. But that wouldn't last for long. Because something was calling me to put the book down and just enter the silence. I often resisted that impulse at first, but then gave in. I would put the book down and just be quite and look out the window and take in the world around me. And I encountered God in the silence--and I felt loved and I loved in return.

Each and every time I left Lebh Shomea, I would feel deeply alive--more alert and sensitive to God, my own spirit and to the world around me. Do you remember those old movies where the safe-cracker would rub his fingertips on sand paper so as to make them more sensitive so that he could feel the tumblers in the lock on the safe? Well, that's how I felt after spending time with God in the silence at Lebh Shomea.

Now for a word of caution and encouragement. Over these three sermons on prayer, I have been talking about an inward relationship with God. But please hear me: In most cases, loving God through prayer is no substitute for loving the neighbor. The silence of contemplative prayer cannot be the silence of indifference to the plight of our brothers and sisters. Remember the second greatest commandment: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

The truth is that our prayer life will gain us nothing if we abuse our neighbors, oppress the poor, and neglect the weak. The prophet Isaiah spoke the word of God when he said: *When*

you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

To God, the outward relationship is every bit as important as the inward relationship. In fact, the love of God we experience in authentic prayer propels us outward. Oscar Hammerstein was right when he wrote: *A bell's not a bell 'til you ring it. A song's not a song 'til you sing it. Love in your heart is not put there to stay. Love isn't love 'til you give it away.* (Oscar Hammerstein, II)

And now for an invitation. Richard Foster writes: *Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to Him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness. He longs for our presence.*

And he is inviting you--and me--to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in. (Foster, Richard. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, p. 1.)

We're invited to pray--to enter a living relationship--for *Prayer is nothing more than an ongoing and growing love relationship with God.* (Foster, Richard. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, p. 13.)