Toward the end of the Gospel accounts of our Lord’s ministry, opposition begins to increase, and the shadows of coming darkness began to crowd closer to Jesus and his followers. Tensions are heightening each day. By the time he enters Jerusalem for his final week, his enemies circle like buzzards, looking for any opportunity to swoop in for the kill. During this week Jesus goes to the Temple daily, teaching people in the open, and facing the daily threat of his foes as they lie in wait for any slip up, any reason to arrest him. Like bullies in the schoolyard, they ganged up on him, they fire trick questions and riddles designed to ensnare him in his own words, no matter how he answered:

Do we pay taxes to Caesar or not?

By whose authority do you act and teach?

Whose wife will a woman be at the resurrection if she has had seven husbands?
They were all spring-loaded traps, landmines of verbal riddle. But in each case Jesus over turns the riddle, the question, and answers with a question of his own. The accusers are put on the defensive, and their frustration increases. At the end of this sad parade of legal maneuvering, one of the religious leaders approached him with a final trick question, “Which commandment is the greatest?” It sounds like a reasonable question, asked by one religious leader of another. But this is not a test question on a theology exam, it’s not idle conversation. It is another lethal trap hidden inside an innocent exterior. If the Pharisee could get Jesus to disparage part of the Law by relegating some of scripture as less important than others, or make him appear lax toward the Law, or simply unable to come up with a cogent and wise answer, Jesus could lose his appeal with the people, or even better, commit blasphemy and give the enemies cause to bring him to Pilate for the death penalty.

There were hundreds of commandments in the books of Moses, not just the Ten Commandments written in stone he received on Mt. Sinai. In
addition to these, there were hundreds more interpretations and additions to the Law accrued over the centuries by the teachers and guardians of the Law. The whole system had become quite complicated, so much so that ordinary lay people simply could not keep up with all the intricacies and regulations. (Reminds us of our need for CPA’s to keep up with the ever-changing IRS regulations, or professional mechanics to repair our complex automobiles. You just can’t leave these matters to amateurs anymore as perhaps you could in the past.) In like manner, the Pharisees rose in prominence as the official interpreters and protectors of the Law, professionals who could help guide simple lay persons in the way and meaning of the Law and its proper interpretation. The last thing these professionals would want would be a simplification of the Law to the point that even the most common person could understand it. Right? The complexity of the Law was their job security.

Notice the answer of Jesus. He quotes the most basic and foundational scripture in all of Judaism, Deuteronomy 6:4-5, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.”
This is from the Shema, the words recited by faithful Jews every day, at every time of worship. They are the words engraved on their doorposts, and written on tiny scrolls worn on their arms and around their headbands. It would not be too great a stretch to call this the greatest, the most basic, of the commandments. But then Jesus makes an unexpected turn, he blurs the lines as deacon Ed said last weekend, He adds a second great commandment, quoting Leviticus 19:18, “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Not one, but two great commandments. It was like expecting a child, and discovering you were having twins; or expecting to hear simple music and being surprised by surround-sound instead. Needless to say, it was not the answer the Pharisee expected.

Jesus boldly announced that on these two commandments all of the other commands and Laws, and all of the words of the Prophets too, hang together. As if twin hinges upon which the entire door of scripture swings, Jesus identified these two dimensions of covenant relationship—love for God, love for neighbor—as the foundation upon which all other
scripture was built, and **to which** all other scripture offered interpretation or elaboration.

When you think about it, this summary even captures the essence of the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments related to loving God—no idols, no other gods, no taking God’s name in vain, obey the Sabbath—and the next six relate to how we should love our fellow humans—honor parents, don’t kill, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t lie, don’t covet.

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? And in a way, it is. **Loving God, loving our neighbor.** The whole thrust of our faith comes down to those two dimensions of covenant relationship. They are the cross-shaped directions of love; one vertical toward God, and the other horizontal toward humanity. But we are not given the choice of **which one of these two commandments** we might obey. It’s not one or the other…there is no true love for God if one does not learn to love the neighbor. Loving the neighbor is **not enough** if it isn’t tied to one’s love for God.
But of course, we get crossed up trying to figure out how to live out this simple *twin dimension* of love. We are prone to elevate the created over the Creator, or to elevate our own desires and plans to divine importance. Sometimes we are tempted to reduce the reach of our love for others based on *how easy it is to love* them, to reduce the size of our *neighborhood* so that it only includes neighbors we *like to love*, neighbors *who are like us*. But Jesus will have nothing of it. The crossing of these two great loves must always *stretch us past* our comfort zones, and challenge us to reach and to care beyond our easy theological constructs, convenient economic systems, and private closed circles.

What would it mean if we could love the neighbor like ourselves? Perhaps this calls for us to have a healthier self-love too, since this is not only a command, but a prediction. In fact, we probably will love others in similar ways to the ways we accept ourselves. The thief thinks everyone else is thief. The person who has come to see themselves as
beloved in the eyes and heart of God is more likely to see that same potential in everyone else. So let’s resolve to love God, with every fiber of our heart, soul and mind. And love the neighbor, in a global village where that neighborhood includes the entire world, past, present and future.