In the Gospel passage that Steven read for us earlier, Jesus was approached by one of the scribes asking him which of the commandments is the greatest of all. Keep in mind that the scribe was referring to not only the Ten Commandment, but all the other rabbinical laws and ordinances as well. The scribe’s question appeared to be legitimate and wasn’t out trying to trap Jesus or anything. Do you remember what Jesus’s response was? His response came in two parts…1st, he began by citing the *Shema*, the biblical prayer that pious Jews knew it by heart and would recite it during their morning and evening prayers[[1]](#footnote-1) ***“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is one”.*** Then he cited scriptures from both *Deuteronomy* and *Leviticus*: You shall *LOVE the LORD your God with* ***ALL your heart****, with* ***ALL your soul****, with* ***ALL your mind****, and with* ***ALL your strength***and *to* ***LOVE your neighbor as yourself[[2]](#footnote-2)****!!!*

 This commandment to LOVE was a call for ACTION! It’s not some after-thought or reflection. It’s not just something that we put on our statement of faith either, or as a snappy catch phrase or slogan on a bumper sticker. It is a challenge that requires us to make some deep personal sacrifices and commitments, leading towards constructive change for the better.

 When Jesus said that we ought to love our God with ALL of our hearts, our souls, our minds, and our strength, the emphasis was on the “ALL” part. It means unconditionally and withholding nothing whatsoever. That’s the kind of love that God expects of us. It is the kind love that is much deeper than we, humanly can express to one another.

 When the scribe heard what Jesus’ response to him was, he said, *“You are right, Teacher. This is much more important than the burnt offerings and sacrifices.”[[3]](#footnote-3)* The scribe noticed right off that this is beyond what we normally offer with our material offerings and sacrifices. And he was right! God is not only interested in what we have to offer materially through our offerings and sacrifices but God asks for a deeper commitment. God wants ALL of our hearts and our complete devotion. Do you see the difference?

 This, in my opinion, was a pivotal turning point of the entire gospel message and a renewal understanding of our relationship with God and one another. **It went from an obligatory and habitual “going through the motion” kind of making the offerings and sacrifices to a genuine confession and heartfelt desire leading towards genuine change in our mind, in our attitude, and in our hearts.**

 As we mentioned last week, one of the key tenets of the Reformation movement was that **we are ultimately saved not by what we do, but what we believe by the grace of God.** Through Christ and his sacrificial love for us, our relationships with God, with our fellow humanity, and with ourselves have been redefined.

 Jesus summed up the Commandments that God has given to the people through Moses and more. The first 4 commandments dealing with our relationship with God: *You shall have no other God before me, You shall not have idols, You shall not take God’s name in vain, You shall honor the Sabbath.*

 The latter 6 dealing with our relationship with one another: *Honor your parents, Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not bear false witness, Do not steal and Do not covet your others’ possessions*. We ought to treat and love our neighbors the same way as we love ourselves.

 The Hebrew term for “neighbor” *shakhen* (שכן) as used in the Leviticus law was generally referred to as one’s fellow citizens, in this case the Jewish people...your fellow “friends” or “companions”, someone whom you get along with, or someone who share your similar backgrounds with. But in the context of our passage today, Jesus offered us a new definition. He was referring to more than just our own fellow “friends”, our “buddies” or people who look like us. The term “neighbor” implies to include all the “others” – the Gentiles as well. The “neighbors” include those who might not be your friends. Someone whom you may not get along with, or someone who might have hurt your feeling, gossiped behind your back, or have failed and disappointed you in the past. Those are our neighbors as well.

 Following Jesus always requires us to do the hard things and not just the simple and easy way. These new commandments supplement the old, not replacing them, but these new ones revive new meaning and understanding of God’s ultimate love for all of humanity. THAT’s what Jesus meant, when he said that we ought to “love your neighbor as yourself” today.

 **God’s radical love is inclusive to “ALL” of God’s peoople**. **It transcends upon ALL traditions, ALL races, ALL ethnicities, ALL cultures, and even across ALL faiths.**  LOVE is the tangible manifestation of God’s presence all around us. And God has entrusted us to embark on this mission of LOVE extended to ALL of God’s beautiful creatures and creations.

 Over the past ten days, in light of the tragic event out in Pittsburgh, the resolve of our nation has once again been put to test of living out God’s commandment to us all….*to love our God with all our hearts, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength….and to love our neighbors as ourselves.*

 In this test of time, we have been called upon to lay aside our differences whether it’s our religions, races, ethnicities or even politics and to stand in solidarity with our neighbors from all spectrums of life against hatred towards fellow humanity. We have been asked once again to ponder upon who our neighbors are and what are we going to do about it? We are ALL neighbors called upon to bear one another’s burdens, as we fulfill the law of Christ.[[4]](#footnote-4)

 Through God’s eternal *Tree of Life*, we stand united as a congregation of faith and a community of God’s shalom, bonded together in sharing our griefs and sorrows through this time of trials and griefs. We pray that God will heal not only our wounds but our souls. We pray that God will hear our cries for mercy, as we overcome our fears with God’s ultimate LOVE for us ALL.

 These are challenging times that we live in and there are challenging works ahead of us if we were to bring God’s kingdom one step closer to reality.[[5]](#footnote-5) We are in this together regardless. As the Presbyterian minister Fred Rogers, who used to live in the very same neighborhood where this tragic incident occurred, once said, ***“We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It’s easy to say ‘It’s not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.’ Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider these people my heroes.”***

 This was not only Fred Rogers’ neighborhood but God’s vision and hope of a society where all of humanities would come to respect and honor one another, as we strive to live out God’s commandment for us all to *“love God will all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds, and with all our strengths and to love our neighbors as ourselves.”*

 From the second passage that we read earlier to the church in Corinth, Paul echoed Jesus’s command for us to place our LOVE for humanity above and beyond. The early church had their share of differences and challenges in dealing with fellow believers, as well as non-believers, with people from all ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds. Some were slaves and some were free, male and females…the list goes on and on.

 Paul emphasized this “agape” love is an unconditional self-sacrificing and yielding kind of love. This Agape LOVE is not a physical, or sensual “feeling” kind of love but rather a “force” - a force that transforms, inspires, and propels others to respond in actions. It’s a mutually benefiting selfless LOVE that directs outward toward others, and NEVER inward towards ourselves. This love GIVES more than it RECEIVES and expects nothing in return. It UNIFIES rather than SEPARATES and DIVIDES. This is the kind of LOVE that God commanded of us to surrender, as we demonstrate God’s love to our neighbors.*We LOVE because God had first LOVED us*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

 Friends, in times like these, in this fractured and broken society that we live today, we need LOVE more than ever been! The world needs more healing and reconciling rather than acts of hatred and perpetrated evil. Let us not be intimidated by acts of evil and terror in this world but overcome evil and hatred with LOVE. Let us re-dedicate our lives and re-affirm our commitment once again to LOVE God and to LOVE our neighbors. As Paul reminded us that we shall not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good and LOVE.[[7]](#footnote-7) LOVE never fails and LOVE never ends![[8]](#footnote-8)

 Let us pray for peace and unity among our neighbors regardless of our differences and may the stream of justice continue to flow through the river of our lives. As the prophet Micah proclaimed to the people, “***What does the LORD require of us? But to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.[[9]](#footnote-9)*** In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Deuteronomy 6:4* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Leviticus 19:18* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Mark 12:33* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Galatians 6:2* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mark 12:34* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *I John 4:19* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Romans 12:21* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *1 Corinthians 13:8* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Micah 6:8* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)