



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Knoxville, TN  
Oct. 29, 2023  
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble  
Sermon: "Hanging By A String"

**Matthew 22:34-40 (NRSV)**

22:34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,

22:35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

22:36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

22:37 He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

22:38 This is the greatest and first commandment.

22:39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

22:40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

**"Hanging by a String"**

Love of God, Love of Self, Love of Others.

The greatest commandment, for Jesus, is plural.

You cannot do one alone.

Love of God, Love of Self, Love of Others.

Many of you probably subscribe to Richard Rohr's daily devotionals. If you do, you know this week they have been covering Mechthild of Magdeburg.

Mechthild was a famous Medieval theologian who belonged to the Beguines, a religious group popular across Europe in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. Because they were laypeople, the Beguines were not a formal order of the church. They had no established rules or founder. They didn't live in monasteries, but rather lived in the cities, particularly among those pushed to the margins of their society, in their time. What united the Beguines was a lifestyle of service and an understanding of the

sacredness of life. Mechthild's theology centered on the nearness of divinity to us, even within us. In oftentimes blatantly erotic and mystical terms, she would describe how the divine spirit infuses the body:

*Lie down in the Fire; she says in one of her famous treatises, See and taste the Flowing Godhead through your being. Feel the Holy Spirit moving and compelling you within the Flowing Fire and Light of God.<sup>1</sup>*

Have you ever felt the love of God so closely and intensely?

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Deut 6:5, quoted by Jesus Matthew 22. Jesus's answer to the question of the greatest commandment. “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Echoing Jesus, according to Mechthild, the soul aflame with the love of God does not cloister itself away. Love of God finds expression in love of others. Contemporary theologian, Wendy Farley, describes Mechthild's ethics with these words,

*Love of God and of humanity are not two separate things, as if one could love God but shun humanity... Love is not an emotion or obligation but is God present in the soul. When we love others...it is God loving them through us.<sup>2</sup>*

“Love of others is God present in the soul.” Think of that. When you feel compassion for someone who is different from yourself, that is God taking root in your very being.

The story of the Beguines and Mechthild is a Reformation story; long before the Reformation, they stripped away everything they saw as an impediment to the love of God. They refused the patriarchal conventions of their day by refusing marriage; they shunned the oversight and control of the church by refusing vows and rules. The Beguines made their homes, not in monasteries, but among the people, seeing Christ in the streets and alleys. Finding God in the very depths of the soul:

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<sup>1</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* 6.29 quoted in Richard Rohr, “Body and Soul Are One in God,” October 24, 2023. Center for Action and Contemplation. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/body-and-soul-are-one-in-god/>

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Farley, “Mechthild's Call to Compassion.” October 26, 2023. Center for Action and Contemplation. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/mechthilds-call-to-compassion/>

*Love...is God present in the soul, they said.*

The Reformation was not *only* something that happened just at one point of time, a distant history lesson, an obscure argument among dead men in Europe. In our tradition, we embrace the phrase Reformed and always reforming.

- Any time the tradition calcifies into hard and fast rules that make no room for the demands of this life;
- anytime an institution begins to serve only itself and not its people;
- anytime the Spirit breaks us open to see a new way of faith and life abundant,
  - That is reformation.
  - That is what we celebrate, on this Reformation Sunday.

When the lawyer asked Jesus about the greatest commandment, it was not a question asked in good faith. Just as we saw last week, when the Pharisees sought to entrap Jesus with their question about taxes, here again, in the same chapter of Matthew, their question is not genuine. Tradition records 613 laws in the Torah. Asking Jesus to pick just one, the lawyer sought to entrap him as a heretic.

But even a question asked in bad faith is not necessarily a bad question. As one commentator I read this week put it, “If only [the lawyer] had asked Jesus that question with tears in his eyes, rather than a smirk on his face.”

In other words, what if, rather than trying to entrap Jesus in a riddle of orthodoxy, the question came from the same place that we often find ourselves questioning God, in our own lives. What if, instead of a trap, it was a real question. A question, like the questions we bring, to this place, week after week. Questions like these:

Sometimes we come, on a Sunday morning like today, and we ask: I can’t be the only one, can I, who had a week that was loss upon loss?

When you can’t turn on the news without seeing the story of another mass shooting with another military-style semiautomatic rifle; and you can’t go to a bowling alley without looking first for all the exit signs; and you’ve still got to get your kids off to school in the morning. Or you’ve still got meetings, and work, and gatherings of friends and family. And this onslaught of horror is becoming so regular, you start to ask, are we supposed to just carry on, like this is normal, like this is okay.

And you come to church with a lump in your throat and a weight in your chest, asking,

Lord, what is the greatest commandment? What would you have me do?

Or, we come and we ask:

I can't be the only one, can I, who, week after week I come to church, and I sing these hymns, and I hear these Scriptures, and I nod to these sermons, but I'm not sure, Lord, I have trouble Lord, believing these words, holding on to this faith. When it all seems to start breaking away, I have to ask:

Lord, what is the greatest commandment? What would you have me do?

And some, surely some, today are asking: I can't be the only one, can I, who feels trapped behind this smile. People ask me how I'm doing, and all I can say is 'fine; I'm fine' because I don't think I could name the truth without my voice breaking. Anger, or loneliness, or anxiety, or grief, or just the tediousness of everyday life, it feels so small, but overtime, it's gotten so heavy. When it gets so heavy, Lord, I have ask,

Lord, what is the greatest commandment? What would you have me do?

Some days, so much feels so heavy, and we ask ourselves: what would God have us do with this heaviness? What does it mean to draw closer to the love of God, self, and other today?

In the *New York Times* this week, the novelist Dani Shapiro published a beautiful and striking editorial entitled, "Why My Fall Made Me Feel So Ashamed."<sup>3</sup>

In her early 60s, one night after dinner with friends, Shapiro lost her footing on the way to the car, fell on her face, and immediately, out of sheer embarrassment, got up, and answered the question before it was even asked, "I'm-OK-I'm-OK-I'm-OK." "I practically chanted it," she writes, "like a prayer, as if saying it might somehow make it true."

But she wasn't fine. She had broken her jaw. She had seriously hurt her ankle. But even more than that, the public nature of it, falling in front of friends, especially in that time of life, not yet in old age but approaching it, made the fall feel like something shameful.

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<sup>3</sup> Dani Shapiro, "Why My Fall Made Me Feel So Ashamed," *The New York Times*. Oct. 24, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/24/opinion/falling-shame-aging.html>

*As word of my fall circulated, I wanted to hide...When I did speak with people, I emphasized how lucky I was, how much worse it could have been. I reframed myself as fortunate, even though my toes were curled around the edge of the abyss.*

And as word spread, as it inevitably does, when you fall on your face, broken in front of your friends, she heard not just pity and well wishes, but also stories. Finally, posting about her fall online brought even more: stories and stories by friends and strangers of their own falls.

*For a while, the comments section of my Instagram account became a community of people, mostly women, not only commiserating but relating, identifying and offering the details of their own falls.*

The editorial ends:

*A season has passed since that evening I lay facedown on the pavement. I have stopped reliving the moment during every waking hour, though it still haunts my dreams. My body is recovering, but I suspect the healing I need to do goes deeper than fractured bones. In the waterfall of comments made by strangers who reached out their hands to grasp mine and pull me back to my feet — in their willingness to say ‘me, too’ — there is a lesson to be learned. If we all could acknowledge our shared fragility, shame would disappear.*

When so much feels so heavy, and convention and pride tell us to hold our fragility as a shameful secret, this novelist found a new approach in shared community, a community of sharing in trust and in love.

Love of God, Love of Self, Love of Others.

“On these...hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus evokes the image of the law hanging by a string, or rather three strings of love, holding up the whole thing.

Teacher, what commandment in the law is the greatest?

Notice Jesus doesn’t say perfect faith, powerful institutions, invulnerable people.

Teacher, what commandment in the law is the greatest?

Notice, his answer is not about power and authority.

Not about legalism or even orthodoxy.

Not about perfection and purity.

When all of those things fade away, or rather, are broken open by the stark, often heartbreaking, ultimately fragile things of this life, this is what remains:

Love of God, Love of Self, Love of Others.

Mechthild of Magdeburg, the famous Beguine and mystical theologian, at the end of her life, was blind and bedridden. She was unable to write her final books. They were dictated to others. At the end of her life, Mechthild gave thanks to God, for all the seasons of her life, including, at the end, even her own helplessness.

*Lord, I thank You that since You have taken from me the strength of my hands and the strength of my heart, You now serve me with the hands and hearts of others, she prayed.*<sup>4</sup>

Love of God, Love of Self, Love of Others.

Sometimes the hardest and most loving thing we can do is admit our shared fragility and let others support us in community.

That is what community is for.

That is what the church is for.

- When we find ourselves lost along the way;
- When our old ways of being and doing necessitate a new approach;
  - When we have kept others at a distance for too long,
  - Or punished ourselves for too long,
  - And God feels distant,
- When social expectations, institutional norms, even the boundaries of orthodoxy need fresh air, need more room so that we can just breathe;
- And when our dreams beg for fresh hope that seems real and not forced;

Let us remember the greatest commandment.

Let it guide our unending journey, of Reformation. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Mechthild, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* 7.64, quoted in James Finley, “Unraveled by Love.” October 27, 2023. Center for Action and Contemplation. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/unraveled-by-love/>