The compactness and summary nature of this Gospel passage always speaks to me. How we characterize this Gospel is actually kind of amusing looked at from across the centuries. In our day and age, one gets high points for being original, so we like to think that Jesus came up with this as something original, but he didn’t—he didn’t make this out of whole cloth. In Jesus’s day, one did not get points for being original. Generally in Judaism, then and now, one gets points or credit for drawing on history. So when the lawyer asks Jesus what is the greatest commandment, (and questions from a lawyer in the Gospel are pretty much always to trick Jesus), Jesus answers appropriately, what in Judaism is a no brainer answer. His answer is the Shema, which is short for Shema y’Israel (Hear oh Israel, as found in Deuteronomy 6, The Lord your God is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your whole heart and mind). Jesus follows the Shema with a second commandment which is “like” it, meaning it is similar in gravity, but not identical. Jesus takes this second commandment as a direct quote from Leviticus, which of course throws us off, because Christians rarely, if ever, quote Leviticus. However, for Jews, the book of Leviticus is the cornerstone of their faith. This is where all the laws (613 of them, which are derivative of the 10 commandments) have been listed. Unlike modern day Christianity where we tend to find laws binding, the law, or set of instructions, is considered a gift from God for Jews (then and now); it is not considered a burden. And Leviticus 18:19 has the clause that includes “Loving your neighbor as yourself,” found in an otherwise long list of other laws. So the Shema (the part about loving God first and foremost) covers and actually encompasses the first few of the 10 commandments. Loving your neighbor as yourself covers the rest of them. And that makes a lot of sense— for put very simply loving your neighbor includes not killing them, stealing from them, coveting their stuff, bearing false witness, etc. Loving your parents includes honoring them. Put to go more deeply, loving your neighbor as yourself is LIKE or something akin to loving God, is a slightly different concept, but it is actually only a small stretch. However, we tend to act more like they are totally two separate and distinct things.

But these two greatest laws are, in fact, so very related…. for if you love God, you love what God loves. But trying to make these words real is hard. For starters, we know that God is so much more generous in God’s love for us and our neighbors than we possibly could even think of being. For instance, think of the relationships you have with people. I found myself thinking generally about how we relate to the people who are loved by people we love. For instance, when your son or daughter brings home who he or she is sweet on, and you try to give the person and your child the benefit of the doubt. You tell yourself that you are going to love the person because your offspring loves them and all the while you are trying to see what they see in them. Maybe you can will yourself to love, or maybe for you it isn’t hard, but admittedly there are so many possible outcomes. Or personally I think back on my own life and wonder what my parents may have thought when I brought boys and later men to meet them. They may have thought, “Gee, I don’t remember dropping Sarah on her head, but she has made some doozy decisions on who to spend time with.” So the whole concept of willing oneself to love another when you don’t even necessarily like them, this is hard stuff. Yet, God sees and loves differently, but commands us to see and love as God does.

If you love God, you love what God loves. God loves freely. God loves smelly people, self-righteous people, annoying people, whiny people, dumb people, arrogant smart people, people with disease or vermin, people who have not bathed, people who hairspray or mouse there hair and wear pancake makeup, Democrats, Republicans, Communists, Capitalists, Muslims, Jews, mainline Christians, Evangelicals, and the none’s, etc. You get the point. God loves who we can’t or won’t love and doesn’t give them second rate love either.

If you love God, you love what God loves. Jesus teaching that these two things held up in very simple terms—-this is one of the first hints that this Messiah, Jesus, is not going to be what the learned of the time expected. Jesus when he makes it simple actually makes it harder. It is generally easy not to murder someone or steal from them, to at least be kind enough to one’s parents; but it is another thing to love them as God does. Jesus the Messiah shows us directly in no uncertain terms in his death and resurrection exactly how God loves. Without condition. Without constraint. Without distinction. God loves gently, as we learn in first Thessalonians, “like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.” God loves insistently, as we learn in Exodus, not giving us what we want but what we need. Moses is not to see the promised land. God loves us fiercely, no matter the cost. Jesus has to go to the cross.

And the anticipated Messianic age does not come with this Messiah. There is more loving to be done first.

If you love God, you love what God loves. And you love HOW God loves. It is that hard, and just that simple. Pray God will give us the grace to do this very thing, to grow into this very thing: the wondrous love of God.