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A Cross-shaped Life

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Mark 12:28-34

To share about her ministry in Japan, one mission worker often wears a kimono – a beautiful floor-length robe with wide sleeves that's tied at the waist with a sash called an "obi." Her outfit is both an example of Japanese culture and an object lesson that she uses to explain Colossians 3:14: "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." In the Japanese Bible she says, this verse is translated as "put on the 'obi' of love, which ties everything together in perfect harmony." Just as the obi ties the kimono together so beautifully, so love ties everything together.

The same object lesson could be used to explain Jesus' response when he is asked by a scribe, "Which commandment is the first of all?" In other words, which commandment is the most important, the most foundational, the one that ties everything together? Jesus replied with two related commandments that centered on love: love God and love your neighbor. Just as the obi ties the kimono together, so love ties together all of the commandments. Exodus 20 describes the Ten Commandments: Honor God above all. Don't make an idol out of anything else. Don't misuse God's name. Reserve the Sabbath as a holy day. Honor your parents. Don't murder or commit adultery. Don't steal or speak falsely against someone else or covet what they have.

These might sound like more than enough rules for living, but there were many more religious laws: about burnt offerings, grain offerings, sin offerings, thankful offerings; about what to eat, what to wear, what to do after childbirth; many more do's and don'ts about worship, farming, sex, and other matters of daily life. Some have numbered these laws mentioned in the Torah at over 600. Others have tried to prioritize them or summarize them. The prophet Micah summed up the law this way: "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). Micah's summary connects well with Jesus' reading of the law. Where Micah said "walk humbly with God," Jesus said, "love God." Where Micah said "do justice and love kindness," Jesus said "love your neighbor." As both immersed themselves in studying the law, both reached the same conclusion.

Jesus began his teaching with a reference to Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "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." They acknowledged God as the one Lord and served as a reminder to love God with their whole being – heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In almost the same breath, Jesus continued, "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" These words appear in Leviticus 18:19, and there they are immediately followed by "I am the Lord." Just as we are to love God because God is the Lord, we are to love our neighbor for the same reason, because God is the Lord. Jesus refers to these as the "first" and "second" commandments, but he also speaks of them together almost as one: "There is no other commandment greater than these" (v. 31).

In both, the word for love is the Greek word **agape**. It's not the Greek word eros which is a kind of romantic or erotic love that depends on attraction. It's not philia, the kind of friendship love that depends on a common background or a common interest, or the same taste in music or the same sense of humor. Agape is the kind of love described in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." This is a love that is chosen, a love that is acted out -- it doesn't depend on good behavior, it perseveres even through disappointment, it loves no matter what. God loves us with that kind of love, and in the same way, we are to love God and to love our neighbor.

A kimono tied together with an obi is one picture of this kind of love that ties everything together. Another way of visualizing this might be to imagine a cross -- with the vertical post representing our love for God and the horizontal post representing our love for other people. Just as both are essential to form a cross, both are essential to understanding and practicing love. Loving God without loving our neighbor leaves us with a single post. Trying to love our neighbor without also loving God leaves us without a strong foundation.

This was the argument in the early church community of 1 John. They were a church in conflict with themselves. On the one side, were those who believed that Jesus was simply a man -- specially gifted by God's Spirit, but still just a man. On the other side were those who believed that Jesus was the eternal Word of God who existed from the beginning of the world and who had come in human form. On the one side, were those who believed that all you needed was faith -- action was not important. On the other side, were those who believed that real faith is always active. The conflict between the two sides was theological and ethical, and on both sides it was so intense that some people were even leaving the church over it.

Yet both sides claimed, "I love God." In spite of their conflict with one another, both sides claimed this vertical dimension of love between themselves and God. Both sides claimed to be following what Jesus gave as the first commandment.

To address their conflict, 1 John doesn't contradict either side. Instead, he builds on the claims of both and says if they claim to love God, they also need to love one another:

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:20-21)

In other words, 1 John was calling them to a cross-shaped life -- to the vertical dimension of loving God and the horizontal dimension of loving their neighbor -- in this case, loving their brother and sister on the other side of their conflict.

Jesus' life and ministry were also cross-shaped. On the one hand, some argue that Jesus was sent to die, to bring forgiveness from sin and peace with God. In other words, they emphasize the vertical dimension. Others say that Jesus came to show us how to live, to break down barriers between people, and to call everyone to follow him. In other words, they emphasize the horizontal dimension -- his ministry of healing, feeding the crowds, and sending his disciples out to teach and to heal.

For Jesus, however, it was not one or the other, but both. By his death and resurrection, he brought forgiveness from sin and peace with God (the vertical dimension), and he brought peace with ourselves and others, peace with the world around us (the horizontal dimension). He taught his disciples to pray and to heal. He said the two greatest commandments were to love God and to love others.

As followers of Jesus, we are also called to a cross-shaped life: loving God and loving others, at peace with God and at peace with others.

Our worship is to be cross-shaped -- we worship God and we worship together. Yes, we can worship alone in the privacy of our own homes or on a mountaintop, but if that's all we do, then we run the risk of misshaping our worship so it's all vertical, without the horizontal. Our potluck meals are to be cross-shaped -- where we both give thanks to God and engage with others. If we focus only on the food, then we run the risk of misshaping our fellowship so it's all horizontal, without the vertical. Our ministry as a church is to be cross-shaped, so we have times of worship and times of community engagement in our neighborhood.

In the same way, our work, school, personal, and home lives are to be cross-shaped -- both loving God and loving others, both lived with faithfulness to God and lived with integrity and service toward other people. It's not one or the other.

At times this may be painful. The literal cross that Jesus died on meant great physical pain and suffering for him, and in his earthly life, he was criticized by religious authorities and misunderstood even by his own family and closest followers. For us

there may also be misunderstanding and criticism and even physical suffering. Enuma Okoro is a writer, speaker and creative consultant. Her work focuses on how the intersecting currents of culture, the arts and narrative shape individual and collective perceptions and identities. She is a 2003 graduate of Duke Divinity School. In her book, *Reluctant Pilgrim*, she says the work of loving can sometimes feel like accepting a wrestling match with God. That's a reference to the Old Testament story where "Jacob... strives with God and ends up with a dislocated hip," and she says, "We too can expect to be wounded by love."

Yet the cross-shaped life is also marked by a particular joy. First John wrote his letter "so that our joy may be complete" (1:4). Notice that he said "our" -- meaning both his own joy and the joy of his readers in the church, on both sides of their conflict. Jesus himself said that he came so that we "may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The cross that was an instrument of torture and death was transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus into a powerful symbol of victory over death, a symbol of God's great love and forgiveness, a symbol of life and joy in the Lord.

As we return to our homes, to our schools and places of work and play, as we continue to be the church wherever we are, may we live a cross-shaped life, reaching up to God and reaching out to one another with a sense of joy and wholeness.

To symbolize this in our prayer today, I invite you to stand, if you're able, and would you please simply raise your hands as a reminder of that vertical dimension of loving God. And if you have room, stretch out your arms as a reminder of that horizontal dimension of loving others. Then I invite us to pray with me.

Almighty and gracious God, we acknowledge you as the one Lord. As we raise our arms and as we stretch them out, we give thanks for your great love that enables us to reach up to you in joy and also in sorrow that makes it possible for us to reach out to others. We give you thanks for Jesus who literally carried the cross on which he suffered and died. Empower us also to live a cross-shaped life, loving God and loving others as he did. Amen.