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Scripture: [Matthew 22:34-46](#)

When I was growing up, “reckon” was a word I heard often:

*I reckon I'll make a casserole for dinner.*

*I reckon it's gonna rain.*

*I reckon I better go to Piggly Wiggly before it does.*

*I reckon you're right.*

To “reckon” was to think, to suppose. As I got older -- and moved out of eastern North Carolina -- I heard it less, and came to appreciate it more. Whenever I hear it used in the dialect of my youth, my smile lines deepen, but I have fallen for “reckon” in its other nuances: as an expression of serious, heartfelt consideration; of a less passive and cerebral supposing, and a more full-spirited coming to terms with, really wrestling with and attempting to understanding something.

This week, a Pilgrim sent me [a video](#) of Maria Swearingen, a Baptist minister from South Carolina who co-pastors Calvary Baptist Church, a historic church in downtown Washington, D.C., with her wife. As a lesbian minister incredibly grateful for and proud of my Baptist roots, I've known about Maria for several years. The gay Baptist pastor pond ain't that big, y'all. But until this week, I had not seen this video of Maria talking about her experiences challenging homophobia in her community in South Carolina.

Maria talks about the people -- particularly young people -- who come to her struggling with their identity as LGBTQ and the rejection they have faced from their families and communities. She says it's these stories that

remind her why this conversation “isn’t one to [just] muse upon, and [say], ‘Well, we agree or disagree and let’s just move on.’ No. We have to stay here and reckon, because relationships are at stake. Community is at stake. Families are at stake. You’ve got to reckon. . . and I’m not going to solve it quickly for you. It matters to me to see faithful Christians reckon with the depth of what love of neighbor really means.”

It matters to me to see people of faith reckon with what the depth of love means, too.

In our scripture reading today, we find Jesus in a twisted game of 20 Questions, reckoning with leaders about the meaning of the law. Just before this scene, the Saducees -- religious leaders concerned with the written law, particularly the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures -- had cornered Jesus with a trick question about resurrection. And just before that -- you may remember from last Sunday if you were here and paying attention -- the Pharisees, the religious leaders concerned with the wide canon of law, both written and tradition, tried to bait Jesus with a loaded question about the legality of paying taxes.

In today’s reading we hear the Pharisees return and ask, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Our English translation here isn’t entirely accurate. (Don’t worry -- this is the only instance in the entire scope of scripture where translation is questionable.) A closer rendering of the original Greek may be, “Teacher, what commandment is great,” not *greatest*, “in the law?” or “What sort of commandment is of great importance?”

Jesus often responds elusively to the inquiries of others, particularly when the questions themselves are aimed at trapping him, or someone who is vulnerable, or God. Rather than expected answers Jesus often offers his

own questions in return, or with parables, enigmatic stories intended to provoke more musings.

He does that today, too, posing the paradox about the Messiah, but not before he answers the question about the great commandment.

Now, we don't know if Jesus paused, or deeply inhaled, or looked up to the sky out of which he heard proclaimed at his baptism, "This is my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased... Listen to him," or if he peered down at the dirt where he knelt and wrote as a similar circle of leaders demanded punitive answers about a woman caught in adultery.

We don't know if Jesus loudly declared the words we heard today, for the people in the back, or if he uttered them with reverence in a still, small voice.

Whatever his volume and cadence, Jesus' response is one of his clearest in our gospel accounts: Echoing the words of Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus says, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*"

And before his hearers can tweet or Instagram the moment, he adds a pivotal 66 characters, *And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself,"* this time echoing Leviticus 19:18.

Jesus more than sequentially repeats two separate ancient laws; he intimately connects them with his own commentary, saying, "*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*"

Nowhere does he say, "I reckon," but he does inherently call for a reckoning.

At Pilgrim, we do pretty well in loving our neighbor as ourselves. Who knew we were a Leviticus church? On Thursday night, at least ten Pilgrims joined over 600 community leaders and members packing the sanctuary of Mount Level Missionary Baptist Church for a Durham CAN delegates assembly, bringing an agenda on affordable housing and jobs to Durham's mayoral and city council candidates -- an agenda that all eight candidates affirmed! Praise God, who has been moving in so many of our congregations, associations, and neighborhoods for the well-being of our siblings and neighbors.

Throughout the years, we have loved our neighbors even when we've had to go against fierce cultural tides to do so: we trace our church roots back to the dissenting preacher James O'Kelly, who denounced slavery in the late 1700s. Many in this congregation remember when we voted to integrate in the early 1960s, as other churches, schools, and community spaces are struggling with or refusing to do so. We officially became open and affirming of the LGBTQ community in 1999; I can only imagine how pathetically late that seems to God. More recently, we've reckoned with what it means to really love -- to listen to and stand with -- our trans\* siblings and neighbors; with what it means to really love our siblings of color as we reckon with the communal spiritual wound of white privilege.

I am *amazed* at what Pilgrims have done in our community and in our world, individually, and as a congregation, historically and just this week.

This is what we will be celebrating next Sunday as we commemorate our 50th year in this building -- having moved to this location in 1967 -- and commission all the boards of our church and all the ministries that flow out of this place like a river.

We love our neighbors. We recognize our intimate, inextricable interconnectedness.

But what about our UCC neighbor churches who are not open and affirming to our LGBTQ community, or supportive of Black Lives Matter? We are frequently involved in interfaith work with our Jewish or Muslim neighbors, but what about our more conservative siblings in Christ across denominations?

There is more room to reckon.

And what about the first hundred characters of Jesus' response about the great commandment: *love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*

Do we love God like that? Do we reckon with God?

What does that even mean? What does it mean to love someone, something so much more than we can understand? What does it mean to reckon with mystery?

Jesus doesn't explain. Jesus doesn't add sublaws, other than connecting the call to loving God to loving neighbor as ourselves. But maybe, implicitly, how to love God is at least partially revealed in his answer: loving God begins with bringing all parts of oneself to God -- our hearts, our hopes and passions, what and whom we love, including what feels broken and devastating, what we can't yet forgive, the pain that overcomes us; our soul, our inner lives, whoever we are and wherever we are on our journey, and the expressions and identities with which we identify, however complicated; our minds -- whatever our questions, however we see and understand the world, whatever our compulsions and frustrations and blind spots...

Loving God begins with showing up with all the parts of ourselves, in the fullness of our complex identities, and like the prophet Isaiah, saying, "Here

I am, God.” Here we are. Ready to reckon with the depth of what loving you, and loving our neighbors as ourselves, really means.

There is a small Swiss village on the border of France that holds a used book fair in the town church each year. In 2005, artist Jan Reymond began creating annual installations each year made of the old, unsold books. In one installation, Reymond filled a high-arched passageway with suspended books, leaving a smaller pathway for passersby to cross through.

[This is the picture](#) on the front of our orders of service. When I saw this photo, I heard today’s scripture: *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

In our loving of God and in our loving of our neighbors, how do these conjoined commandments hang?

Do they hang like chains, limiting our movements, keeping ourselves or others shackled to fear?

Do they hang like nailed theses, like arguments to be debated and proven?

Or do they hang like gymnast rings, daring us to risk ascension and inversion?

Do they hang like lights, like the star lanterns at [Gonza](#), like mobiles or paper cranes, inviting us to hope and dream, to awe and delight?

Do they hang like love notes to the world and the One who breathes on and through us all?

*Amen -- may it be so.*