I don’t know if you remember it, but to me it’s unforgettable. In 1991, Natalie Cole released an album of cover songs originally written and performed by her late father, Nat King Cole. Songs like “The Very Thought of You,” “Straighten Up and Fly Right” and “Our Love Is Here to Stay,” just to mention a few. The concluding song utilized digital remastering technology to produce a duet of father and daughter. Nat’s 1951 recording was remixed with Natalie’s 1991 voice producing an unforgettable remake of the song “Unforgettable.”

I kept coming back to that “coming-togetherness” when reading this passage from Matthew’s Gospel today. Jesus is asked by a lawyer of the Pharisees which commandment is the greatest, or some say he was asked to choose one type from among the commandments that is more important than the others.

Jesus’ answer isn’t remarkable in itself, or unique. The command to love God above all else is the undisputed greatest. It is the prayer spoken twice a day by observant Jews and a confession of faith said in Jewish worship week by week. The so-called Shema. That is, Shema, Israel—as in Hear, O Israel, the L ORD our God, the L ORD is one. You shall love the L ORD your God with all your heart, soul and might. This beautiful admonition from Moses in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 combines the oneness, holiness and wholeness of God with the oneness, holiness and wholeness of human response.

For Jesus to say the Shema is the greatest commandment, the one that would stand at the top of the list of all the others would have been enough to validate his authority among the Pharisees. They agreed. Nothing is more important than loving the one, holy God wholly. Nothing to see here. Move on.

But then Jesus moves on and says the second is like to it, Love your neighbor as yourself. This second one is also from Scripture—Leviticus 19:18. Combining these two can be found in the teaching of rabbis before him. By connecting this to
the Shema, however, Jesus combines the love of God and the love of neighbor, the vertical and the horizontal, inward faith and outward works.

Makes sense. But then what does he mean by “second” and “like”?

In the midst of COVID and our political distress, I have been seeing an interesting renewal of this debate about what Jesus means by second and like. Some theologians and pastors who oppose liberal things like the Black Lives Matter movement and LGBTQ inclusion and Christian advocacy for things like more humane immigration and asylum policies, say that when Jesus says second, he means secondary in importance. That is, second means something like don't get too active in these things because they will distract you from your first priority as a Christian, which is to worship God with all your heart, soul and might. The things that matter most are eternal and not temporal. The gospel is about making sure you are welcome in heaven someday more than welcoming heaven to earth today. Hmm.

It’s true that you can be a passionate advocate for justice and yet have no active spiritual life that includes God in your thoughts and desires. Sadly, many people live as though God doesn't factor into everyday life. Social movements are everything. Politics brings meaning and identity. This fails to honor what Jesus calls the first and greatest commandment.

Our worship and prayers draw us deeper into communion with God. They allow God to deliver us peace, inspire us to act and sustain us with hope. Giving God room to speak to us, listening to the voice of God—especially as we hear it in Scripture that is filtered through the Spirit of Jesus: this is the beginning of wisdom. And doing all of this with siblings of spirit in the church encourages us and keeps us on track when our thoughts and values can drift under the force of worldly winds.

But the real force of Jesus’ words in this passage is the way he adds the love your neighbor as yourself commandment to the love God commandment. “The second is like it” means, I think, that the love your neighbor part isn’t optional or disposable or secondary; it’s inseparable from the love God part. The greatest
commandment is singular but twofold: love God and love your neighbor. These are two sides of the same coin. You can’t have a coin without both sides of it.

Jesus is saying you can’t truly love God if you are not truly loving your neighbor. And loving your neighbor, who is created in the image of God just like you, is the surest test of whether you are loving God.

So, how do we honor Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbor as ourself today in order to demonstrate that we understand the inseparable nature of love for God and people of all kinds?

First, we have to be honest with ourselves about implicit bias that produces our lack of love for some people. Jesus was radically egalitarian in an era that wasn’t. Try to name one time in his ministry when he operated off of bias of hierarchy where some people were by nature superior to others. His biggest scandal—including, I might add, what’s behind this encounter with the Pharisees—is his love for Gentiles. And the greatest breakthroughs in the early church after Jesus were in breaking down hierarchies between Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free, clean and unclean, and so on.

And yet, we seem to persist in trying to get Jesus to fit our prejudices instead of allowing him to fix our prejudices.

I mentioned Isabel Wilkerson’s new book *Caste* a few weeks ago. The main argument she makes is that race is only the façade of the house of American discontent; caste is the internal framework that holds it up. She says this: *We cannot fully understand the current upheavals or most any turning point in American history, without accounting for the human pyramid encrypted into us all. The caste system, and the attempts to defend, uphold, or abolish the hierarchy, underlay the American Civil War and the civil rights movement a century later and pervade the politics of twenty-first-century America. Just as DNA is the code of instructions for cell development, caste is the operating system for economic, political, and social interaction in the United States from the time of its gestation.*

If you listen carefully to our political talk these days, you will hear versions of caste embedded within them. The most
prominent is the longstanding version that has white, European Protestants at the top and in charge of the country, while Blacks of African descent are at the bottom, and Asians, Latinos and others are in between. There are variations in each caste that involve men being superior to women, straights to gays, and so on. Maintaining that social order is behind many political slogans. We can deny being racists all we want, but until we honestly examine our hearts about our need to be on top by keeping others below us, we will not be able to love our neighbor AS OURSELF. We may love our neighbor, but we will not love our neighbor as ourself until we see ourself in our neighbor.

But second—and here’s the most uncomfortable part for me, we have to love our neighbor who disagrees with us. Sometimes that’s a family member or dear friend who is close to us. One of the worst things about this time in our country is how politics has driven a wedge between people we consider loved ones.

There’s a strange new caste-like system at work in this. People who agree with me are on top with me. I may even justify my disdain of those below me by dismissing their opinions as being beneath me. This cuts both ways. For some, it’s a caste system based on education, and for others, tradition. Progressives side with those who seek social progress; Conservatives side with those who seek social stability. Universities tend toward liberal-mindedness, and people in the media generally side with intellectuals and academics. You might imagine I feel more at home with these people. Which makes me less at home with those who believe their longstanding values are under assault by cultural elites who look down on them—even if they are white, which is a violation of our American caste system. On the other hand, people who have felt put down their whole lives for not fitting into the dominant profile of America because of their race or ethnicity or religion or sexual orientation likewise feel disdained and dismissed by traditionalists.

The church has to stop this. We have to practice mutual respect and empathy. We can’t depend upon others to bring peace if we are not willing to do so ourselves. All of us have to be part of the connecting work of
loving God and neighbor, no matter how hard the task.

The next few weeks will be pivotal for our country, no matter how the election turns out. I am not telling you that only if my candidate wins will things get better. I am telling you that either way, we have to cure this caste thinking that is undermining our inseparable duty to love God and one another.

The title of the album Natalie Cole put out that closes with her duet with her late father is Unforgettable … with Love. Think about that: “with love.” It all comes down to that in the end, don’t you know?! Love. Love for God; love for Every Body.

Imagine Conservatives and Progressives singing the same gospel song together. The Conservatives would be singing the melody in the voice of the departed that sounds across the ages. They keep the gospel song the same song. The Progressives would be singing harmony in the voice of the hopeful that sounds forth from the future. They keep the same gospel song ever new. Like Nat King Cole and Natalie Cole singing the same song together, as if they are

inseparable.

It would be, I tell you, unforgettable. Amen.