

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for October 25, 2020 ~ Proper 25A

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A religious leader asked Jesus “which is the *greatest* commandment?” Although we are told that the question was asked in order to “test” Jesus, in fact the question is typical of rabbinical dialogue concerning the Mosaic Law. Jesus and that man shared a common heritage, religion, and scripture. As a means of avoiding offense against any one of the original Ten Commandments, the rabbis had “built a fence around the Torah” consisting of 613 commandments - 365 prohibitions and 248 positive precepts. These were then distinguished as to “heavy” or “light,” “great” or “small” commandments according to the difficulty or ease of their fulfillment. According to Matthew, Jesus was asked to name *the* great commandment in the law. Jesus' response contained not one but *two* commands as well as two statements about their relationship.

The significance of Jesus' answer lies not in the novelty of the combination of these two passages of Scripture. Their combination is found in earlier Jewish intertestamental documents as well. Unique to Jesus' teaching is that the love of neighbor is made similar, equal in “heaviness” to the love of God. It gives our love of God a human benchmark beyond scrupulous obedience to an impersonal law. The stress is on *love* not obedience. The human object of love is the “neighbor” – not just persons in one's own racial group, family, or social circle but in the teaching of Jesus includes the alien, the enemy, and the prisoner as well. For Jesus, love for God coupled with love for the neighbor constitutes the most important benchmark of all. Everything else depends upon it. Our Church a long time ago recognized the importance of Our Lord's Summary of the Law by making it a part of the celebration of the Eucharist. In the current Book of Common Prayer, it is an ordinary part of Rite I and an optional element of Rite II.

Corrie Ten Boom, described a tall African man who lived in a round grass hut with his large family as one who “loved the Lord and loved people – an unbeatable combination” (*Tramp for the Lord*, p. 75). That truly is an unbeatable combination, especially when you see the meaning of this kind of love as expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the unconditional, other-oriented, selfless love which is devoted to seeking to meet the needs of others as much as it is concerned with meeting one's own needs. It is the essence of what motivated God in the act of creation. It is the impulse behind God's liberation of the Israelites from slavery and their deliverance from their Babylonian captivity. It is the life-force behind the words God put in the mouths of the prophets who called God's wayward people back into a vital relationship with God and warned them against unloving acts of oppression, injustice, and neglect of the more vulnerable among them. This divine love by which and for which the universe was created, took on flesh and blood in the person of Jesus the Messiah. He is the visible expression of the invisible God whose nature and name is Love.

Loving God is expressed when we engage in private devotions. But it does not end there. God is most fully loved when we love those around us whom God has created in his own image. The deep wisdom of this life-giving principle was driven home to me in a powerful way a few years ago when Gay and I were in the Rocky Mountains through a forest that is on fire at this time. We had hiked up about six miles to a little lake just above the tree line and sat down to have our lunch. I sat there thinking about how close I felt to the Creator as I surveyed God's handiwork -- the blue sky, the surface of the cold, clear lake as still as a mirror, the hawk soaring above, the snow-capped peaks. As my eyes feasted on this grandeur, they came to rest on my wife. Her face was framed by all of it. It became clear to me that she was the only part of all the creation I could see and admire created in the likeness of God. I knew in a way I had never

known before that I am never closer to God than when I am in the presence of another human being. I believe that is why God not only wants us to worship in private but calls us to come together as *ekklesia*, the assembly of God's people. Our worship of God is incomplete, our love of God half-hearted, if it is not fleshed out, lived out in our relations with others. And, churches, like individuals, are healthiest when they are more concerned with the needs of others than with their own internal affairs. As God's priestly people, we are the normal means whereby God's arms embrace all people. The church is a kind of crucible in which we learn to love.

Frankly, we can't be healthy persons if we don't learn to love others. Thomas P. Malone once observed that most emotional problems can be summed up in the kind of behavior where a person walks around screaming, "For God's sake, love me." "On the other hand, healthy people are those who walk around looking for someone to love. And, if you see changes in the people who were screaming, 'love me, love me,' it's when they realize that if they give up this screaming and go to the other business of loving another human, they can get the love they've been screaming for all their lives. It's hard to learn, but it's good when you learn it" (Thomas P. Malone, in *Guideposts*, quoted in *Your Church*, July-August, 1975, p. 6). How tragic it is when it can be said of us, as Scobie's wife said of him in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*: "It is certain that he loved God, but it is also certain that he loved no one else."

So, love divine, not only concerns our relationship with God, but also has to be incarnated, fleshed out, in our relationships with those about us, and not just our own kind, but also our enemies, the alien, the prisoner, and those in all kinds of distress. As St. John put it, "If one says he loves God but hates his neighbor, that person is a liar. For you cannot love God whom you cannot see, and hate your neighbor whom you can see." Oh, to be sure, it is not easy to *feel* love toward some people. But this love does not depend upon a feeling. It runs much deeper than human emotion. It is a love that is bound up in a covenant. Thus, it seeks to do what is right in relation to others whether we feel like it or not. If God's love for us relied on a feeling alone, God would have abandoned us long ago for our wicked behavior. But God's love for us, the same love God calls us to give to others, is more profound and mysterious than human emotion or human justice. If we are to learn to love our neighbors, we have to return to this benchmark again and again for without it, we can do nothing.

Loving God is more than fulfilling a duty. It is enjoying God's joy and delight in what God has created. It is allowing oneself to be touched and transformed in heart, soul, and mind to love other people as the Divine Lover has loved us. It is incarnated when we give to others what has been given so generously to us. It is the foundation for our stewardship of all that God entrusted to our care. It is the benchmark that reminds us to "work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God."

When Moses went up the mountain to receive the commandments from God, he wanted to see God's face. God granted Moses a glimpse of the divine glory, but not the divine face. Since that day, the essence of our faith has been summed up in the two commandments, which teach us that to love another person, created in the image of God, is to see the face of God. If you want to see God's face, you have to look no further than the face of your neighbor. If you want to love God, truly love God, then love your neighbor as you love yourself. To do these things is to experience God's reign in our lives.

Love for God and love for the neighbor is an unbeatable combination, the essence of how God created life to be lived. Like a door hangs from its hinges, so the entire scripture hangs from these two great commandments. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself."