

PENTECOST XXIV

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” Leviticus 19:18

Jesus said. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22: 39

Seems pretty clear, doesn't it? After loving God, our next central obligation as Christians is to love our neighbors as ourselves. We all know this. We all believe it.

But is this great commandment so clear? What does it mean to love our neighbor as ourselves? And what do we do about it? How do we live out our commitment?

In my formative years as a Christian, when I was a highschool student deeply involved with the Episcopal Young Churchmen, all the talk was about what *love* meant, and about what *neighbor* meant.

Neighbor, we learned, did not mean simply someone whose back yard bordered yours. *Neighbor* was anyone and everyone. That is, we were not required to love only those who presumably looked like us, whose demographic resembled ours, whose school district and sports teams and skin color and (Protestant) religion we shared. (This was Maine in the 1950's remember.) God and Jesus were asking us, no, telling us, to love everyone – no matter how different, no matter strange, no matter, even, how disagreeable.

Then there was the question of *love*. I suspect that during my highschool days most of our talk about *love* in the EYC centered not so much on Jesus' concerns as on those of our priests and counselors and parents: that is, they did not want us to think that *love* meant *sex*. And they did not want us to mess around with sex, thinking that we were somehow following Jesus' wishes.

Later, when I was back in church after some years of absence, one of my wise fellow parishioners said the line that burned into my memory – and heart – and which I repeat often: “Christian love isn't a kind of feeling; love is action.”

Christian love isn't a feeling; love is action.

Now, this is both liberating and daunting at once. Liberating, because the concept of love as action means that we do not have warm fuzzy feelings toward everybody. We don't have to feel about mean-spirited colleagues the way we do about our best friends, our parents, our children, our partners. That is freeing.

On the other hand, if love is action, then we are asked to treat everyone – however nasty, however objectionable, as we would treat those for whom we do *feel* love. That’s a real challenge.

Both of these angles toward the Second Great Commandment are helpful. Both approaches take the question of loving our neighbor beyond the realm of subjectivity and emotion, (and emotions, of course, are notoriously difficult to control absolutely); beyond the realm of subjectivity and into the realm of justice. We aren’t asked to *feel* the same way about everyone, as followers of Moses and Jesus; we are asked to *treat* everyone equally.

What hasn’t gotten so much attention, in all of my Christian education over the years, is the second part of the Commandment: *as yourself*. What does it mean to love ourselves?

I’d like to ask you to close your eyes for just a minute here and ponder this question. What does it mean to love yourself? What images or memories or ideas come to you as you consider this question? *What does it mean to love yourself?*

Okay. That was not a quiz, and I’m not going to ask you to share your responses with your “neighbor.” But I’ll share a bit of my own experience as I meditated about that question and this sermon.

For one thing, I didn’t go instantly to the formulation that *Christian love isn’t a feeling; love is action*. I thought about feelings. I *felt* about feelings. After all, The Great Commandment is expressed, not in today’s Hebrew Scripture but in Deuteronomy, as *Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*. And whatever *heart* may have meant in ancient Israel, it’s impossible to divorce the actions of the heart from a sense of emotion, of feeling.

So I thought about feeling love for myself, I thought about feeling towards myself with the emotions of love that I feel for Sam and Liz and Amelia and other family and friends– that deep reservoir of tenderness and warmth and joy and appreciation and gratitude. I also thought about treating myself with the actions of love – treating myself equally with – well, with what? With whom?

I couldn’t find any easy answers. So suddenly this love commandment assumed new layers and levels of challenge, and opened up new areas for questioning, self-examination, and theological inquiry.

Now you know, I don't mind this at all. I'm far more comfortable with, and interested in, complicated questions than I am in formulaic answers. And I'm not going to come up with a lot of answers for us today. I will try to suggest a couple of ways I approached the question.

One way was that I found myself reversing the equation. That is, what would it mean to treat *myself* the way I treat other people? And admitting how difficult, or impossible, it is really to eliminate emotion, what would it mean to *feel* toward myself as I do toward others?

Well, here's some of what I *try* to do, and to feel. I *try* to recognize and appreciate and encourage and give thanks for the gifts I see in others. And I *try* to encourage and challenge others to grow and change, to try to become their best selves. I *try* to inspire others to work together for a more just and equal world. Some of these aspirations engage emotion, some involve action. And I emphasize *try* here; these are my goals and my hopes in my relationships with others, and I certainly fall short of my ideals.

And how do my treatment of myself, and my feelings toward myself, stack up against the way I am with others? I don't know. I suspect I'm better at challenging myself to new goals than I am at giving thanks for what I believe I've accomplished. (As I suspect most of us are. Most of us, I suspect, engage in more self-scolding than we do self-appreciation.) But I think continuing to explore the question may help me in my efforts to become more loving – both to others and to myself.

Then I began to think about God. That central question that it's all too easy to forget: Where is God in all this? How does God love me? What does God love about me? What does God appreciate and give thanks for, and what does God challenge me to?

If we ask this question of ourselves, we should all come up with some individual and unique answers, because we are marvelously diverse. But today's Epistle offers us some common answers, I believe, as we ponder what it is God asks of all of us as apostles.

First, Paul tells us, God asks us to have the courage needed to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News. *We had the courage in our God to declare to you the Gospel in spite of great opposition.* That's as true for us today as it was for the earliest Christians. Whether we find ourselves facing the opposition of the religious right, or the opposition of a secular society and media that believe the religious right is all there is, God asks us to have the courage to claim otherwise– to proclaim the Gospel of justice, equality, peace, and kindness.

Second, apostles have integrity. *Our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery ... we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.* God asks us, as followers of Jesus, to match our actions to our words and our words to our hearts. We are not called to “sell” the Gospel – or to sell anything, by using whatever strategy we think will win. We are not asked to use emotional manipulation or intellectual browbeating to win people over. We are called to enact the Good News, to live it out in word and in deed.

And third, Paul tells us that apostles are vulnerable. Our translation today days, *We were gentle among you*, but one of my commentaries says that a good case can be made for the translation, “*We were as infants among you.*” The apostles treated the Thessalonians “*as a nurse caring for her children,*” at the same time that they were “*as infants.*” *Everyone* is vulnerable; *everyone* is open. As apostles we are not called to be powerful, authoritative, charismatic figures, though some of us may have those gifts. Rather, we are called to undertake profound relationships with others, risking certain complication and ambiguity, and possible painful rejection, so that we live the truth of the gospel for and with others.

Courage, integrity, vulnerability.

According to Paul, these are some of the qualities God values, God calls us to, God appreciates – some of the qualities that God *loves* in us. We could enumerate others as well. But three is a good and sacred number, and three is enough for today. I suspect that if we seek these qualities in ourselves and in others, if we devote ourselves, sometimes, in our prayer lives, to contemplating these qualities, we will discover something about loving neighbors, and about loving ourselves as well.

And that, after all, my dear friends, is the second great commandment. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* Alleluia! Amen