

PENTECOST XIX

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am God. Leviticus 19:18

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Matthew 22:36

Love God and do as you please. St Augustine

The Great Commandment(s). Perhaps the best known verses in our entire Judeo Christian heritage. The second, loving our neighbors as ourselves, is known commonly as the Golden Rule.

We often hear, in talk about God and the Bible, that the God of Hebrew Scripture is a God of anger and the God of the New Testament is the God of love. This is simply untrue. There's plenty of love in Hebrew Scripture – just look at today's reading from Leviticus: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And there's no lack of anger in Jesus' ministry: remember Jesus' cleansing of the Temple or his blasting of the fig tree, or his sometimes irate outbursts at the scribes and Pharisees.

One thing that is different between how God acts and speaks in Hebrew Scripture versus the New Testament is this: the God of the Hebrew Bible is more parochial, more provincial, more local, in vision than Jesus is.

Note the Leviticus commandment: *You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin... You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your*

people.

By neighbor, here, God, or the author of Leviticus at any rate, clearly means, literally, neighbor. That is, means *Israelite*, means *fellow Jew*. Remember, the great struggle for God's "chosen people" as they liked to think of themselves, was to survive as a people, as a unit. That's why so many Hebrew Scripture rules and regs now seem so weird and archaic: *they are*. They are meant to ensure health and procreation and distinction. That is, they are rules and regs designed to protect physical health, guarantee offspring, and distinguish the Jews from competing and neighboring tribes and religions. The duty to love one's neighbor is clearly defined: *love us*.

Jesus lives in a different time, and comes with a different vision. Remember, when someone asks Jesus who his neighbor is, Jesus replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Samaritans were not Jews, they were despised by the Jews, and the feeling was mutual. Yet Jesus' example of a good neighbor is a Samaritan, and he shows love and mercy to a victim of roadside crime who is both a Jew and a stranger. So when we say "the love of Christ" that's a really big and demanding love.

If any of you went to church youth group, as I did, I imagine you may have entered into the discussion not only about what *neighbor* means but about what *love* means. Of course, love is a big topic for teenagers, in or out of youth groups. But what we learned in those discussions about Christian love is that your neighbor is not literally your neighbor, but anyone and everyone, and that *love* does not mean *like* (or, of course, have sex with). As followers of Jesus we are not called to like everyone—or Jesus would have NO followers, not even himself. But we are called to treat others as we would wish to be treated (that's the Golden Rule version). And as

followers of Jesus we are promised and assured that we are loved by God, and in the knowledge of that love we are charged to love others as we ourselves are loved.

That is, I think, to treat everyone equally, and kindly, and mercifully, and with forgiveness. A tall order. But that's why the First Commandment is the First, and Greatest. Engaging consistently in acts of service, being intensely involved in struggles for justice, do not, for us, mean that the first commandment doesn't signify. Plenty of secular humanists keep the second commandment far more zealously than do most Christians or Jews.

But the first commandment remains primary. There's a dimension to loving God that goes beyond or is different from loving one's neighbor. For us, God remains the ultimate point of reference. Prayer, public and private worship, wrestling seriously with issues of faith, and seeking always for the truth about God: these are essential to our life of faith. They are essential because they undergird and inspire all that we do and all that we are.

Some of you must have heard one of my favorite stories about my daughter as a little girl. One day in kindergarten, Lizzie came home one day, tearful and even grubbier than usual. I asked her what had happened. "The kids were picking on John Dunne," she told me. John Dunne was a playground pariah who was said to "dribble." "I told them to stop. I told them, 'If I don't love John Dunne, I don't love God.' So then they beat me up."

It's a story worth repeating, I think, because it illustrates so well the famous line of St. Augustine's I quoted at the beginning, *Love God and do as you please*. Sounds great, doesn't it? But the point is that if we do love God, truly, madly, deeply, that has the most profound effect on what we do, what we

“please” to do. Because Liz loved God, she had to stick up for the kid who was being teased and bullied, and she got beat up for her pains, for her *love*.

The soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved.

That’s the second half of Augustine’s pronouncement. *Love God and do as you please, for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved.*

I said at the beginning that in Hebrew Scripture God confines the command of love to fellow Jews. By the New Testament God’s vision has evolved, has broadened, and God’s Son comes bearing that Good News. *God doesn’t just love Jews, and neither should you*, Jesus says. *God loves us all.*

So God has changed, God has, I believe, grown. And we can too.

As followers of Jesus we behave lovingly toward our neighbors, if and when we do, not because we are good people, though we all are. But plenty of good people don’t follow Jesus. We behave lovingly because not to do so would *offend* the God we love and who loves us. *Who loves us*. When all is said and done, that’s what matters: God loves us, unfathomably, absolutely, and forever.

With that knowledge, we, like God, are free to change and grow. And, our reward will be great. As Augustine witnesses, *You took these lesser things, and you drove them from me in Your great grace; and there in their place you have given me Yourself O God; you, O God, are my sovereign Joy.*

Alleluia! Amen

