

October 25, 2020

May I speak to you in the name of the living God:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

The last time I had the pleasure to speak with you, I cited today's Gospel: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

This passage, not only in Matthew, but as it appears in parallel versions in Mark and Luke, feels to me like the very heart of the Christian message. So it is important to remember that Jesus did not pull this commandment out of thin air! The greatest commandment is articulated no fewer than three times in Deuteronomy: 6:5 You shall **love the Lord your God** with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." 13:3 " your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed **love the Lord your God** with all your heart and soul." " so that you will **love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live."

So, recognizing that Jesus was citing a commandment well known to everyone who knew Jewish law, and note that we are told that it was "a lawyer," that is someone who we can reliably believe, knew the law, who was asking. They knew the answer, and the lawyer asks this question, not only as the gospel tells us, but because it is so plain in the text: The lawyer asks him this question to test him. And not to test him on an arcane or difficult point of law, but on the most basic point of law. As if someone asked an American, "What is the first amendment?" We would strongly expect a person to be able to answer it, but it would be a big "gotcha" moment if they could not. This is not obscure law! It is not as if someone asked an "average American" to tell them what 5 U.S.C. SECTIONS 7321–7326 are. We wouldn't expect anyone to answer that, though if there are any lawyers in the room, they might recognize that code as otherwise known as the Hatch Act.

But back to Jesus. As I said above: this feels like the heart of the Christian message to me, but not because it originated with the words of Jesus.

Yet, this is the heart and the soul of the Christian message. These are the words that turn the world. They are simple. They are to the point. They are not the difficult, near impenetrable texts that would make, in theory, a congregation really wish for a truly learned sermon to help them enter into these mysteries.

Love God

Love your neighbor.

It's not complicated.

[BIG PAUSE]

And there we have it...

It

is

not...

complicated.

Now, I gotta say, I like complicated. I like to look for complicated problems, difficult texts I have to really work at to understand. And this? This is not that. It is not complicated.

Which is why it is terrifying.

I had a friend once tell me that what she didn't like about Christianity was the way that Christianity regarded all people as sinners. And I thought to myself... you're not? Huh!

Because these two, simple, uncomplicated commandments: How many of us can say in our hearts that we keep them, every day, every hour, every minute? Let's focus on the second and look around you in this room. Or, you, on the livestream, at whoever is with you. And if you are alone—special greetings to you!—and think for a moment of those you would be seeing, but, whom you can't be with right now. Have you loved *each* of these ones as you love yourself?

This is the devastatingly stark, inescapable simplicity of love.

It's not complicated.

But it's not easy.

Now, if you're like me, you have probably just thought about a good half-dozen people whom you see—or perhaps used to see in pre-pandemic times—regularly whom you have failed to love as well as you love yourself. That, it seems to me is the first hurdle in this commandment of extravagant, abundant love. And the people you just looked at, the people you just thought of? Those are often what we think of as “neighbors.” But that doesn't go the whole mile with this commandment.

(Now, I want to pause here for a moment to suggest that another way to address this of this question is to return back to Matthew 5 in which Jesus says “love your ENEMIES” and he doesn't set any geographical boundaries around THAT.)

But neighbor is not *only* an individual nearby, but so to speak, next to. And its meaning shifts as the group speaking shifts. Here in Waterbury, it could be Middlebury, which is a neighboring

town. Here in Connecticut, it could be New York, or Massachusetts, neighboring states. Here in the United States, it could be Canada or Mexico, neighboring countries. Here in North America, it could be South America, neighboring continent. Or the Caribbean, neighboring islands. When we think of neighbors as something small, like next-door neighbor we do a great injustice to the expansiveness of Jesus' commandment. Neighbor expands with each concentric circle of affiliation until we can well talk about our neighbors across the Atlantic, our neighbors across the Pacific. Put another way, there is no one you will ever meet who is not your neighbor.

So how do we do it? How do we live up to this uncomplicated, simple, abundant, extravagant, expansive commandment? I don't have *the* answer.

But I think it breaks down to this: We try. We fail. And then, in the words of Samuel Beckett, we try again, fail again, fail BETTER. We confess our sins against God *and our neighbor*. We try not to pick and chose who my neighbor today is based on their loveability. We try not to mistake for love our own desire to help someone who needed to work through something for themselves. We try not to leave the love out of "tough love" for love. We try not to stay away when we should draw near, or to crowd in when we should stay away. We listen. We are flawed, striving, and often flailing beings. But in this commandment, let us follow the words of the psalmist and delight in the law of the LORD, and meditate on it day and night. And TRY.

Texts for October 25, 2020

[Deuteronomy 34:1-12](#)

[Psalm 90:1-6,13-17](#)

[1 Thessalonians 2:1-8;](#)

[Matthew 22:34-46](#)



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