

“Love Your Neighbor As Yourself”
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Matt. 22:34-46

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” Now while the Pharisees gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David, inspired by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I put thy enemies under thy feet’? If David thus calls him Lord, how is he his son?” And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did any one dare to ask him any more questions.

Today’s lectionary lesson has central the most important verse in the Bible. A lawyer asked Jesus, “Which is the great commandment in the law?” And Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

This verse occurs in three Gospels, in Paul, Galatians 5:14 and in James 2:8, where it is called the royal law. St. Augustine (third and fourth centuries) said that not all Scripture is equal. In fact, he said, this verse, “Love your neighbor as yourself” is more important than any other part of the Bible. We still believe this with St. Augustine. We believe that any interpretation of any other part of the Bible that condemns somebody else or some other group, some other race, some other religion, some other sexual orientation, another gender, another political persuasion, is wrong. Love your neighbor is the royal

law, above all others.

Loving God is loving Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And wanting to follow him, be like him, imitate him. Jesus is the center of our religion. And the result of our loving

God is to love our neighbor made in God's image.

The key is loving the neighbor the way we love ourselves. And if we can't love ourselves or don't love ourselves, we cannot love our neighbor or God.

There are two ways we come to love ourselves. The first is through our parents' love for us. And the second is through some later cataclysmic converting revelation of God's love for us through the cross of Christ.

Our parents are stand-ins for Jesus. They react to us as we grow up with a delight and sincere caring that God holds for us. They teach us to see ourselves as God sees us. The second way we come to know that we can love ourselves is to know that God sent His Son into the world to die on the cross and take upon himself the separation from God that we all experience.

As Presbyterians, it is the former way that we come to love ourselves and therefore our neighbors. When I was at Princeton, and we began to give testimonies, almost all of us were able to say that there was never a time in our lives when we did not know that Christ was our Savior, our Lord. Only a very few Presbyterian students preparing for ministry gave testimonies that said they were living lives without God, confused and lost, and suddenly had a time of revelation in which they knew Christ was their Lord and joined the church.

That's why we baptize our babies. They come to know Jesus Christ every

moment in growing up loved, cared for by their parents. We experience Jesus Christ in our homes.

In First Samuel 1:28, we see the story of Elkanah and his wife Hannah, who went up to the shrine at Shiloh every year to make sacrifice. And when she was there, Hannah each year, because she was barren, would beg for a child. And the Hebrew word for beg can also be translated borrow. So when Samuel, her son, was born, she saw him as borrowed from God. And when he was weaned, she took him up to Shiloh and turned him over to the high priest, Eli, to serve as altar boy in the shrine. And she said, “As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord.” So she borrowed him from God and then she loaned him back. And that is what Christian baptism symbolizes. Our children are borrowed from God and then loaned back to God.

In the early church, when new families came into the church, like in the case of the Phillipian jailor, the family was baptized all at the same time -- adults, children, babies, even all the servants and slaves owned in that household. John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the River Jordan, but when Christ died and rose again and the church was formed, the new Christian baptism had water as a symbol only. Pouring, sprinkling, immersion -- every form was accepted. That was because the water symbolized the beginning of new spiritual life.

In John 3, Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and Jesus said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said, “How can a man be born when he is old?” Jesus answered, “Truly I say to you, unless one is born of water AND the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

And then Jesus likened the spiritual life to the wind. You see the effect of the wind, but you do not see the wind itself. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

There are religious people who go around asking others, "Are you born again?" They mean, "Do you have a spiritual life?" If you say yes, they want a date when you got that spiritual life. The answer, of course, is 2000 years ago on a hill outside of Jerusalem where our Lord was crucified and another place in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit came on all flesh -- Pentecost. And that Holy Spirit has passed down through believers for all these centuries. And we receive it at baptism, symbolically.

In early Christian history, children born after the family became Christian did not have to be baptized. Their parents' baptism was good enough. It brought them into the faith. We do it to our children as a reminder that they are part of the faith. And as an expression of hope that they will love Jesus with their heart, mind, and soul, and love their neighbor as themselves. And the Scripture says that hope will not disappoint us.

Because we have always known that God loves us in Jesus Christ, enough to die for us, we love others. That love within us flows like a river from our hearts to the hearts of others. That's why we, as a nation, give foreign aid and why we provide food for the hungry in our own country, and shelter through Hebron House and the Hope Center. There is a direct line from the cross through baptism to helping others.