

YOU SHALL LOVE

TEXT: Luke 10:25-37

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind. This is the basic commandment of Jesus and of God and of life. We are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul and spiritual emotions, with all the strength and vitality of our inner lives, and with all our brains and human brilliance (or lack thereof). This is what God wants from us more than anything else. God wants us to love God with “all” that is within us. This is a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:4, the Shema, the basic tenet of Judaism. We need to underline the word “all” four times. Nowhere are we given any exceptions.

Norma just read for us the story we call The Good Samaritan. I think this story is so familiar to all of us that she could have just read the title and stopped there. So, in one word, what is this story about? Is it about the Levite or the Priest who carefully avoid becoming “unclean” by touching the injured man? Is it about the injured man who lies bleeding and broken by the side of the road? Or perhaps it is about the innkeeper who trusts that the cost of caring for the injured man will indeed be paid at some time in the future? Well, surely the story is about the Samaritan – the Good Samaritan – who stops to give aid and cares for the injured Jew.

It’s a great story, but it is not the story that is important. The story is just so Jesus can make a point. And not just any point. It is the pivotal point of his entire ministry. It brings it home to his listeners – yes, the lawyer who challenges Jesus’ words. Because following the “all” dissertation, Jesus adds one more bit of instruction. “You shall love God with all your heart, and soul, and strength, and mind” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”.

Jesus here quoted Leviticus 19:18b. This was the first time in human civilization that any person had ever uttered this sacred combination: “the love of God and the love of neighbor”. The two laws were combined into one moral law. Neither law was to stand

on its own; the two laws were to be intertwined and inter-connected. Like a spinning double helix, they belonged and swirled together.

This second commandment means that we human beings are to have an inner healthy love and acceptance of our selves, whereby we can truly love someone else. We human beings are to focus on our neighbors' needs as much as on our own. Over the past several years, our Bishop Elaine Stanovsky has focused her Annual Conference Episcopal Address on this passage of scripture. Her overriding title has been "Do this and you will live". It has led me to focus on these verses in a different way than I had before. "Do this and you shall live". This is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. We are not simply to mouth these words, pray these words, think these words, philosophize about these words. We are to do them. When we do these teachings, we find life and we will live.

Jesus said, "Do THIS and you shall live." The word, THIS, is singular. There are not two commandments, but one commandment. It is as if Jesus treated the two commandments as one and that they could not be separated.

Now, a word or two about neighbors. The lawyer asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" This question is pretty fundamental in life. How we define "my neighbor" is immensely important. After Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan he asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

I think we are still struggling with the answer to that question. As the lawyer would have known, the priest and the Levite were following the laws and customs that forbid them touching anything unclean – including the blood of an injured man. Yet, in Jesus' story they are not the heroes. That honor goes to the Samaritan, a tribe usually shunned by the "chosen" as outsiders. In order for us to understand and live into the parable, we must be willing to acknowledge that our neighbors include those who are

unclean, those who are from different tribes, and those with whom we might not usually associate ourselves.

How do we, as Christians, respond to our neighbors in, say, Charlottesville, Virginia, who, a couple of years ago, when the white supremacists staged a rally, were attacked by counter-protesters, resulting in one death and numerous injuries? Who do we see as our neighbors when so many people are injured? Is it easier to empathize for innocent bystanders or the police officers just doing their jobs? Do we want to be neighbors for those who are protesting peacefully? But what about those who came to Charlottesville with guns, batons and teargas? Are white supremacists who are injured our neighbors? Could we extend the metaphor, so that those who teach others to hate are robbers who have stolen away the ability to love? Are the “Antifa” who intend to stop the neo-Nazis, whatever the cost, our neighbors? Even when they strike back? Are we better when we believe racism is wrong, but stay home? Can we believe that we are neighborly to people of color whose day-to-day experiences of racism would name us as perpetrators? How can we be neighbors, when maybe each of us is the priest, the Levite, the man beaten, the robber?

Who are our neighbors? Are we the struggling family from Honduras, fleeing the brutality that has reigned in their country, entering our country illegally in order to provide a safe home for their children? Are we the Border Patrol whose job it is to detain and incarcerate children, with no health care, inadequate food and clothing, and no parents to give them comfort? Are we those who can easily walk on the other side of the road so that we do not have to be defiled by such scenes?

Who is my neighbor? Jesus has told me that I am to love all of these people as I love myself. And he added: “Do this (that is love) and you shall live”. This is not a “works righteous” kind of religion. That is, a person does not do works of love in order to be saved. It’s just the opposite. Because we are saved and God’s love lives within us, therefore we have hearts of love and do acts of love. This is “because-therefore” religion

and not “if-then” religion. It is not “if we love, then God will love us”. It is “because God loves us and God’s love lives within us, therefore love flows out of us from God.

The conclusion of this story is important. Jesus does not ask the legal expert to identify who in the parable is *his* neighbor, as if that is what this man really needs to discover. Jesus asks him to identify who in the parable is “a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers”. The point is that the parable and Jesus’ concluding question force the lawyer to consider the nature of neighborly activity. Jesus directs him to see neighborliness in the actions of the Samaritan and not to speculate about what might qualify a person to be considered someone else’s neighbor. Since a Samaritan is the parable’s model character, the legal expert conversing with Jesus must learn about genuine love from the example of a person he would regard as his enemy. Jesus has reframed the question that prompted the parable in the first place; instead of identifying who counts as a neighbor to be loved, Jesus indicates that a person truly acts as a neighbor through – you guessed it – loving. The legal expert wants to know who deserves his love, Jesus replies by showing how authentic love will seek out, even in the unlikeliest of places, neighbors to receive compassion and care.

This story is as timely today as it was when Jesus told it. The stories of the atrocities that our government is perpetrating on our southern borders horrify us. We see those who determine policy for the care of detained immigrants turning their backs on the families, and especially the children, of our neighbors to the south. The men and women working at places such as the detention center in Clint, Texas, need their jobs, yet they are limited in what they can do for the children. In Washington, the agency’s leadership knew for months that some children had no beds to sleep on, no way to clean themselves and sometimes went hungry. Its own agents had raised the alarm, and found themselves having to accommodate more new arrivals. The agents in the facility, trying to provide care to the children, are struggling to be in the role of the Good Samaritan, rather than being the people passing by. But for those who from miles away make policy, being a Good Samaritan takes more than a change of mind. It takes a change of heart.

The message of the parable is so very clear: Being a good neighbor and showing love by doing, are more honorable than merely speaking about love. Franklin D. Roosevelt said in his first inaugural address: “In the field of world policy, I would dedicate this nation to the policy of a good neighbor”. Jesus’ instruction to us is simple, yet so profound: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself”. “Do this and you shall live.” Amen.