

Not Free to Not Love

Mark 12:28-34

November 5, 2006

I.

Today's reading seems tailor-made for a sermon, doesn't it? We are told to love God and our neighbors. Who would argue with that? We have heard this basic principle of Christianity for years. On the surface it seems so obvious that a sermon could almost deliver itself.

And given the many uncertainties and complexities of religion and theology, don't we often look for some easy answers; some central principles that are at the heart of it all?

Today's Gospel seems to describe that all-encompassing fundamental truth. But, as is often the case with Jesus' teachings, the simple answers in theory are not so simple in practice. When we look at the world, and at society, and even at the church, we discover that this part of Mark's Gospel is not a guiding principle in many aspects of contemporary life.

II.

Let's look at these two great commandments Jesus proclaimed. It's important to understand what they are and what they are not. Two important points should be considered. One is the origin of the two commandments and their place in Scripture. The other is how we actually carry out the commandments.

First, the commandments we heard today are not part of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai. In the Ten Commandments we are told that we must not worship other gods or graven images, or take the Lord's name in vain. But the Ten Commandments do not explicitly say anything about loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We must go elsewhere in Scripture to find biblical authority for that.

Then the Ten Commandments tell us we shall not bear false witness against our neighbor, and we shall not covet anything that belongs to our neighbor. But again, the Ten Commandments do not say anything about loving our neighbors as ourselves. That also is elsewhere in Scripture.

And we find them in the Jewish law God gave to the Hebrew people in the desert, now written in the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. They continue today as central to Jewish worship, and when Jesus spoke them in the Gospel he made them central to Christianity.

The first great commandment, that God is one, and that we are to love God with every part of our being, is the fundamental Jewish confession of faith of Deuteronomy 6:4-5. It is the Jewish counterpart of the Nicene Creed for Christians, and even today it is the call to worship used to begin services in synagogues.

The second commandment, found in Leviticus 19:18, is inseparable from the first. That's why, when Jesus was asked by the scribe to give the greatest commandment, he answered with two of them. Jesus basically said that loving your neighbor flows naturally from loving God, and that it is not possible to do one without doing the other. We show our love of God by how we treat our neighbor.

This reading from Mark also appears in the Gospel of Matthew, and there it is said that on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. You probably have heard that verse from Matthew proclaimed during our Rite I service of Holy Eucharist.

Also, in Romans 13:9 St. Paul said that the commandments against adultery, murder, stealing and coveting are summed up in the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. And in

Galatians 5:14 Paul again said that the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself summarizes the whole law.

So, we are called to understand these two great commandments as the overarching summary of everything that Christians are called to do in the world. They stand alone as statements that include the other commandments, and they evidence Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament law (Gal. 2:16). There is nothing in our faith that exists apart from, or is unaffected by, the obligation to love God and our neighbor.

The other point I want to mention is how this reading makes clear that rituals and ceremonies, and merely showing up at church on Sundays, are not sufficient if we also are not actually doing what these commandments require.

In the Gospel reading the scribe said, and Jesus agreed, that these commandments were much more important than the Temple system of burnt offerings and ritual sacrifices. And just as that was true for Jewish rituals and ceremonies then, it also is true for our rituals and ceremonies now. By placing these commandments ahead of sacrifices Jesus was saying that what resides in our hearts takes precedence over the formalities of worship.

In Psalm 51, for example, we say "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart."

And in the Book of Hosea, at 6:6, the LORD said, "for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

This does not mean, however, we can just forget about church. It does not mean our rituals and ceremonies are unimportant. While there can be tension between the commandments and worship if the commandments are not followed, there is no conflict when we do love God and our neighbor. When we do that, our worship is a natural expression of our love, and we embrace our liturgy as a deeply meaningful activity that is consistent with the commandments.

III.

So, what did Jesus really mean when he said to love God and our neighbor? Can love be commanded? Can love be summoned on demand? Does it come in a flash bang moment, or does it develop over time? How does this kind of love work?

Mark's Gospel, as well as the entire New Testament, was written in Greek because that was the prevailing literary language of the time. And in Greek, unlike English, there are several different words that can be used to describe several different notions or ideas about love.

Three principal Greek words for love are *ερός φιλιά* and *αγαπή*, and they are important because they all translate into the word "love" in English, but they have distinctly different meanings in Greek. Although there have been many classical studies about these terms, I can summarize them this way.

Eros is love in the sense of "being in love." It suggests passion, longing, and romantic love. The English word "erotic" derives from this root. That is not what Jesus meant.

Philia means friendship, and loyalty to family and community. The English term "filial" that describes the relationship between parents and children is related to this word. That also is not what Jesus meant.

Agape, the third Greek word for love, is how Jesus used the term in the Gospel, and it refers to a self-sacrificing, unconditional, all-giving love not based on expectations of receiving anything

in return but rather extending oneself out of a sense of devotion, selflessness and recognition of the love that God has for us.

Jesus used this meaning to describe the paternal love of God for humanity and our love of God and humanity. It succinctly is stated in 1 John 4:19, that "We love because he first loved us [and] since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another."

IV.

With this background, let's look at how we are called to love God and our neighbor. An obvious point is that it is not optional in either case. We do not have a choice. We are not free to not love. In some ways it involves an act of our will. It is something that we do, not something we merely feel. It is something that we bring about and make happen, which is not always easy.

When Jesus said to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, he meant that it is something we do with our entire being. How does that work? Do we scrunch up our eyes, clench our fists, grit our teeth, and just force all of that love to come out of us?

No, not at all. But it does mean that nothing is held in reserve. There are no half measures, no cutting corners, and no doing it tomorrow. Jesus did not say just to trust God, or worship God, or pray to God, or be obedient to God, but rather to love God with all we have. And in loving God we just naturally will do those other things

As a result, it is not only a matter of feeling, but also of action, doing, commitment, and how we actually live our lives. It is a response of the human will, a form of behavior that is evident externally and is an example to others. Loving God is inseparable from how we think, act, decide things, and present ourselves to others.

And when we love our neighbor, we are to do it just *as* we love ourselves. Note that Jesus did not say to love our neighbor *instead* of ourselves, but *as* ourselves. This means that we are called to be just as willing to do something for another as we are to do it for ourselves. It means we treat needs of others as important as our own needs. And when we do that we actually experience a more complete expression of ourselves.

That sounds good, doesn't it? It's hard to disagree with in theory. But it's also virtually impossible to do all the time in practice. Our hearts are not transformed all at once. We just don't just go around not loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength in one instant, and then suddenly start loving him in that way in the next instant.

V.

As individuals these commandments can sometimes challenge us beyond our capabilities. As part of the church, however, as part of the Body of Christ, it becomes easier.

Remember what Jesus said in the first words of his answer to the scribe. He said "Hear O Israel." He was speaking to the community of faith as well as to people individually. He already was in Jerusalem and knew his death was but days away, and he was setting forth the framework within which the disciples could carry forward his teachings.

Jesus knew that people, acting alone, without interaction and support from each other, could not truly love each other. To love each other necessarily implies the existence of a community. And he knew that people, acting alone, could not fully place their love of God into action. Love of God is more than just individual piety. Again, it is something that requires participation in a community.

VI.

So, today, here on the Gulf Coast as this eventful year draws to a close, how do we love God and our neighbor? What do we do, and what have we done, to carry out these commandments?

Perhaps, as we reflect on the year, we might recall individual acts of charity and kindness that we have offered to others, or have received from others, and we might recall deeply spiritual moments where in the silence of prayer we felt the Holy Spirit move within us.

For most of us, I would imagine that those moments had their foundations in the community of faith that we share here at St. Thomas. And for most of us I also would imagine that our ability to live into these two great commandments is grounded in the collegiality and fellowship that we share here at St. Thomas.

And even though I have been standing here and explaining why you should love God and your neighbor, I believe that most of you are on the right side of those commandments most of the time. And when you are not I'm sure that you know you can find strength and support right here from others who love you anyway.

I know we try to do what Jesus told us to do. And when we do it we see that it is good and our hearts are moved to do even more. Such is the nature of love. The more we give, the more we seem to get back. The more we honor God and each other, the more we seem to be blessed.

I pray that as we move away from the difficulties of the last fifteen months, our common life together can lead us to an even deeper sense of spirituality as we continue to worship God, care for each other, and minister to the community. And I pray that our church can continue to be a place where these two great commandments govern all that we do in God's name.
Amen.