

Loving Your Neighbor: How Far Will You Go?

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Reformation Sunday/On Earth as in Heaven: God's Call for Justice 3

Introduction

Quick: tell me the most important provision in our US Constitution.

If this isn't any easy exercise for you – and I trust even those who are amateur scholars of the Constitution might find it hard to decide which provision is the be-and-end-all on which the rest of the constitution depends – then you'll appreciate that this question is not an innocent one.

No, Jesus is being tested by a Pharisee, who are known for their strict adherence to all 613 of the commandments in the Torah. Quick, our scripture scholar says, pick the most important out of all of those.

Remember that last week we looked at Jesus contesting with the Sadducees on the propriety of paying taxes to the Roman Empire, and today, we are right into the thick of it again. Jesus, who broke a lot of the smaller rules of the Jewish purity code in his ministry, is not exactly the kind of person who will be considered orthodox by the standards of the Pharisees.

It's About Love

The move Jesus makes in response is probably one that we should expect by this time in Matthew's gospel – because Jesus makes it clear that it is all about love.

The word for love the kind of love in the Greek called "agape" which is not romantic love, but the compassionate love that comes from God.

I'm not absolutely sure that it was this kind of love that is sung about in the old Beatles song that goes, "all you need is love" (sing a few bars with me, if you can), but it might work to look at the song that way. While the phrase can be read on a simplistic level, there's a profound truth to it. The world does depend on love. Scientists have discovered that our ability to learn something new is directly tied to the relationship we have with a teacher or mentor when we are trying something new. We literally cannot learn anything new without being loved. Children who don't have at least one adult who loves them do not thrive. Adults who do not have loving contacts cannot grow as adults.

the power of love

Here is a sad truth: a lot of children don't get the affirming love that they need. Another sad truth: a lot of us adults don't get the affirming love we need either. As adults, we may want to pooh-pooh this a bit – after all, our society teaches us to be competent, independent, and unneeding.

The solution is for our communities to become places where love crowds out the loneliness so many experience. Christian social worker Dorothy Day puts it this way:

“We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”

– [Dorothy Day](#)

In a way, it is a bit shocking that it is the book of Leviticus that says this, because this part of the Torah contains rules for common life, including things like paying your employees on time, refraining from lying or stealing, leaving the gleanings in the field for the poor to reap at harvest time, and keeping the Sabbath.

In other words, loving your neighbors is not just a sentiment, it is a working practice for the community of the people of God. It has to encompass practicality, and justice for our neighbors.

Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels all share that Jesus taught the two greatest commandments are this love of neighbor and the traditional Jewish prayer called the Shema (you shall love your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind) until by the time that the gospel of John is written and shared we get to a theology of God in three simple words:

“God is love.”

And here's the secret: this love is the method of God's healing action in the world.

In a real way, this love is about belonging, to ourselves, to our communities, and to God. What the gospel writers knew, what the writer of Matthew knew, what Dorothy Day knew too, modern researchers are confirming. Christian and sociologist Brene Brown writes in her book *the Gifts of Imperfection* that resilience in the face of struggles and fears is related to how we embrace and practice this gift of love:

Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and connection.

Brene Brown

How Far Will You Go?

The more you see mutual love between you and God, and the more people you identify as neighbors to love, the more you are practically engaging in living out the way that Jesus taught.

God calls *us, you and me*, to love our neighbors. You and me and everyone in the church is called (*vocatio*) by virtue of our Baptisms to participate in God's work to care for all creation. That's the good news.

We are in an uncertain world where neighbors of ours – here in Sierra Vista, Cochise County, Arizona and around the country and world are in a world of hurt, whether because of the pandemic, or the economic fallout, or longer-term issues of racism and immigration or climate change.

So I want us to get clear on something as Christians: as we grow in our faith, we should be identifying *more* people as our neighbors not *fewer*. If your list of who your neighbor is hasn't changed in a while or gotten smaller, it might be time to consider expanding the list. To get started, let's look at the kinds of people that Jesus hung out with, and therefore would call a neighbor:

- Poor people who needed financial assistance, clothing and shelter
- Prisoners
- Aliens residing in foreign lands
- People of different ethnicities and races
- People who messed up their lives and need rehabilitation
- People who needed medical care and can't afford it
- People isolated and lonely

The health of our society depends on us seeing and naming all of our neighbors. In this time of COVID-19, the future will depend on us going further than we have gone to help those in need, to comfort the lonely, to reassure the fearful, to feed the hungry, to redeem those in prison, to permit our seniors dignity in their final years, a way for everyone to get medical care, and to mitigate climate change for generations to come.

Friends, let us have eyes to see, and ears to hear our neighbors, and demonstrate our love for all. Amen.