
Love God, Love Neighbor

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 25 – Year A**

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” You’ve heard that before, right? It’s the summary of the law and the prophets—and of the Christian life. And it’s so familiar and obvious that we are likely to nod in affirmation and skim right over it.

But something in Matthew’s story gives me pause today. One of the Pharisees, a lawyer, asked Jesus which is the greatest commandment, to *test* him. It seems like a fair question, so how is this a test? Well, there are 613 commandments in the Hebrew scriptures; and if Jesus picks, say, #597, as the most important, what does that say about the other 612? And about those who hold them as most important, and have made them their agenda?

Jesus cares for them, all of them; and he takes the law seriously, so seriously, that he refuses to reduce it to a single issue or to diminish a single law. He points to the heart of the law, the two commandments that unite and undergird all the others: love god and love your neighbor. As yourself.

Jesus’ answer would have been embarrassingly obvious and familiar to the Pharisees, as it is to us. Like them, we know this, of course! Like them, we can recite these verse and locate them in our Bibles. And like them, we clearly need to hear this teaching again and again. Because knowing the words, up here in our heads, isn’t enough. We must seek to discern what these words mean and what they look like in our own lives. And we must do them.

But the fact is that too often we, like the Pharisees, would much rather find a simple, targeted rule that we can prioritize over others and apply in no uncertain terms, a position we can advocate absolutely in all situations. In this way, we seek to protect ourselves from the contingencies of the moment, from the uncertainties and confusion of real discernment and real relationships with real people—or with the real living God. That’s much more manageable, and less risky, than loving God and loving neighbor, whatever that means!

Yes, whatever that means. I’m afraid that these words are so familiar that we assume that they are simple, too. And they *are* simple, when I’m at my desk poring over my Bible, or when I’m feeling particularly holy and loving. But their meaning is not so clear in the middle of a tense election season, or an argument with my spouse. It’s not so clear when so many people are hurting or despairing or raging. It’s not so clear a tired man holds up a cardboard “homeless” sign outside my car window. No, the fact is that as soon as I pull my nose up out of the Bible, as soon as that loving feeling wanes, as soon as it becomes inconvenient or awkward, these commandments become more challenging and paradoxical.

Commandments. Yes, loving God and loving neighbor are *commandments*. Something intentional, active is required here. Which runs counter to the all-too-common notion that love is something that happens to us. That it is a feeling that overtakes us, and makes us feel nice and want to do nice things. But what happens when that feeling disappears, or when we can’t conjure it?

What happens is that we do love anyway. We show up anyway. We choose love anyway. We choose kindness. Compassion, curiosity, forgiveness, service, the good of the other. It’s not an easy choice to make, because it almost always means giving something up—self-image or self-righteousness, pride, security, privilege, right, agenda. Money, time.

Love in the biblical sense is concrete, active, embodied. Anyone can love in theory, or in general. But loving the person, the flesh-and-blood person in front of you—loving in the messiness and ambiguities of our close relationships, our communities, and our public life—now that is a different story! It is hard, humbling work.

Just ask the Benedictines! At the center of their monastic life together is a conviction that love of God and love of neighbor are bound together, even when in tension with each other. How do you love God? You pray and worship and study, and you love your neighbor. And how do you love your neighbor? You serve, listen, welcome, respect, obey, persevere. And you love God.

If you try to love God alone, you may be tempted into self-absorbed piety or self-absorbed activism, running roughshod over people and sacrificing everything and everyone else to your own salvation. And if you try to love neighbor alone, you may lose your center, trying to be all things to all people, and forgetting that God is God, and you are not. In both cases, the temptation is to twist religion to feed your own ego or to suit your own agenda.

Benedictine monks are commanded to hold these two together, and in tension. They were commanded to *do* love for God by showing up for prayer, intentionally focusing on and listening to God at regular times throughout the day. This was the *opus dei*, the work of God, the most important work of the monk, which communicated in a concrete way that there is, as Benedictine Joan Chittister says, “no stress so tension-producing, no burden so complex, no work so exhausting that God is not our greatest agenda, our constant companion, our rest and our refuge.”^[1] And yet, if a stranger happens to knock on the door during this great work of prayer, they are to stop their prayer, open the door, and greet the stranger as Christ in their midst. Their prayer, that very important rule of prayer, is interrupted and enriched by the appearance of the stranger.

Love of God and love of neighbor. It’s easier said than done, and understood. Which is perhaps why we need to hear these commandments over and over, not just with our ears, but with our hearts—and return to them again and again, and ponder anew every day, “What does this mean here, now—in this place and at this time?”

Here, now, even in this time when so many are scared, angry, divided, we are commanded to love. In this election season, in this pandemic, we have to double down on love. We have to choose love, and do love. May our love of neighbor be grounded in and strengthened by our love of God, and may our love of God be embodied, brought down to earth, in our love for one another. And, in this place and at this time, may we bear witness to the healing power of God’s love.

[1] Joan Chittister, *The Rule of St. Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, 85.