

Sermon Preached October 26, 2014
Year A, Proper 25
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

There is an apocryphal story about the disciple John, who lived to old age. The story is that he settled in a small village. Since he was a living celebrity of the faith, he was asked to preach the next Sunday at the community's worship. When the day came he stood up and said, "Little children, love God and one another," and sat down. The folks were puzzled by the brevity of his words, and, being hopeful, asked him to preach again the following week. The following week he stood up and repeated the exact same words, then sat down. This went on for two more weeks until finally, after he sat down that time, someone boldly asked him why he kept repeating the same short phrase, and adding nothing more. He reply: "As soon as you master this, I will move on."

Jesus' famous summary of the law, that we are to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and our neighbor as ourself, is deceptively simple, but difficult to embrace. Like the slogan of the game Othello – it takes a minute to learn and a lifetime to master.

We've been reading this section of Matthew for a number of weeks. Jesus is in Jerusalem after his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. It is the week before his arrest and crucifixion. He goes to the Temple and begins teaching in parables. Over the past few weeks we have heard Jesus tell the parable of the two sons, the parable of the wicked Tenants, and the one of the wedding banquet. In the meantime the chief priests, the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees are all trying to trip him up and get him to say something which will either turn the people against him, or allow them to arrest him. Today is no different. A Pharisee comes to Jesus to test him and asks him the greatest commandment.

The Israelites were a people of the law. They lived by the Torah, the Law of Moses. The Pharisees were the leaders of the community and taught the law to the people. In the reading after today Jesus goes on to chastise them for being hypocrites. Jesus tells the people to do what the Pharisees teach, but not what they do. But today the Pharisees try to see if Jesus is orthodox. Is he teaching the law, or making up something new? Does he know the law? And Jesus actually gives a very orthodox answer. Loving God and neighbor is the point and spirit of the Law of Moses.

What is interesting is that it takes a number of books in the Bible to lay out these many laws. Trying to get people to love God and neighbor is no easy task and the ancient Israelites were given lots of rules to help them achieve this. Laws which told them when, how, and how often to worship God. Laws which told to make restitution to those they have harmed. Laws for the fair treatment of slaves and foreigners. Laws of family life.

Laws about clothing and food which honor God. Laws against cheating God and people. Laws for tithing to God a portion of what you grow. Laws of sacrifice. Laws of celebration. Laws of Sabbath. And so on.

And Jesus rightly points out that the purpose of these laws is not to make life difficult for people, but to make life loving and holy. In fact, right at the beginning of Matthew, in chapter 5:17 Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Let’s look a little more closely at what Jesus said. First, we are to love God. Who is God? Of course, that’s a big question, but we can give a start to the answer by saying God is the Creator, the Beginning. God brought all things into being. From that we can extrapolate what Jesus spoke about last week, that since God created everything, including us, everything belongs to God.

Therefore loving God involves worshipping and honoring the divine being, as well as loving all that God's has created. One way we love God IS by loving neighbor.

The next question to consider is who is our neighbor? Jesus tells a wonderful parable about that with the story of the Good Samaritan. Our neighbor is not simply those people who live near us or are like us, but our neighbors are all people whom God has made. Even people who are very different from us. Because even the stranger, the foreigner, the prisoner are created by and loved by God. Jesus said we must even love our enemies.

In fact, these two commandments are tightly related. God and neighbor are just another way of saying God and God's creation. As Mother Teresa once said: "We love the God we can't see by loving our neighbor who we can see." We may be able to love our neighbor without loving God, but we cannot love God without loving our neighbor. It is not possible.

Now sometimes our neighbor isn't very loveable. And sometimes the creation is annoying. I put a lot of time into my tomato crop this year, but I put it in late and most of the fruit was reaching fruition at the beginning of October. It was then I discovered a nasty part of the creation known as "Tomato Blight."

It reminds me of the wonderful Monty Python parody of the hymn, "All things bright and beautiful." The Monty Python version goes like this:

All things dull and ugly,

All creatures short and squat,

All things rude and nasty,

The Lord God made the lot.

Each little snake that poisons,

Each little wasp that stings,

He made their brutish venom.

He made their horrid wings.

Funny as it is, there is real truth in that. The creation and its people, our neighbors, aren't necessarily a loveable lot. I think sometimes the command to love neighbor is not something we can will ourselves to do, it is something we can only do by the grace of God. We cannot will ourselves to love perfectly, but we can recognize our dependence on God to achieve this goal. We can prayerfully stretch our hearts to find what is beautiful and good about each part of the created order in order that we may love it.

Which brings to a final consideration of Jesus' summary, "what is love?" What does it mean to love God and neighbor? Does loving God mean we should mumble a grace at our Thanksgiving feast and occasionally attend church? Does loving neighbor simply mean we must be polite to the difficult people at our office? It might be helpful to think of how we love others in our life and use that as an example. For instance, how do you love your spouse, your partner, or your children? How does your love show?

Love is not simply an emotion, although it often has that component. Love is more than a commitment, although it must contain that. Love involves sacrifice - joyfully given.

Because we love our children, we happily give up vacations and new clothes in order to feed and cloth and house them and buy them gifts. Because we love our spouse, we gladly give up an evening with friends to tend them when they are sick. Because we love our friends, we joyfully help them weed their garden and water their plants when they are out of town. Love means that we give up things that are precious to us: our time, talent, and treasure, in order to nurture and honor the ones we love. Love includes sacrificial giving. But this giving is not a burden, it is a joy! Because it is for the sake of our beloved we make this sacrifice happily. It gives us pleasure to do so.

The Laws of the Israelites often included sacrifice. For instance, the people were to bring the first fruits, the best 10% of the harvest, and offer it to God first, before taking anything for themselves. This was a way to show love to God. They were also commanded to sacrifice on behalf of others. In Deuteronomy 15:11 God says, “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” This is an example of the Law commanded love of neighbor through sacrificial giving. The Law of Moses defined how to love God and neighbor. And that love was in the form of sacrifice and generosity. It was about treating people fairly, honestly, and with justice. We are not to cheat God or others to benefit ourselves. Love demands giving, not taking.

So what does loving God and neighbor look like today? How can we translate how the Law defines love into today’s world? How can we translate our own experience of love with family and friends into love of God and neighbor? It involves generosity.

Loving God and neighbor means being generous with our time, talent, and treasure on their behalf. It's not about merely tolerating them, but embracing them. Not just giving money for food, but seeking justice for those who can't get jobs, or homes, or education, or health care. It's a big world, and no one can tend to all its people, but we are to offer a part of our selves for this mission.

This stewardship season as we consider how we manage our resources, when we consider how to use the gifts God has given us, we need to share not only with God and the church, but with the needy. Part of loving God means loving neighbor and giving of ourselves on their behalf. Even the unpleasant neighbors need our love. St. John's has a wonderful history of loving our neighbors. Our work with Monday Night Suppers, the B-Safe Program, and the Community Shop come to mind. What great examples of joyful sacrificial giving!

And this cheerful giving is a part of the larger stewardship picture for all of us, personally as well as a parish.

Loving God and loving neighbor includes sharing our time, talent, and treasure on their behalf. It may take a lifetime to master, but the journey is worth it. Amen.