

Who is My Neighbor?

Mark 12: 28-34

All Saints Sunday/ 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 5th November 2006

All Saints Sunday/Mission Emphasis Sunday

Never before in Israel's experience were these two verses from the Hebrew scriptures linked together, that is until Jesus replied to the questioning scribe. The scribe was evidently impressed with Jesus' response to the Sadducees and Pharisees who were trying to trap him into saying something heretical regarding the resurrection of the dead, paying tribute to Caesar, or what married life might look like in heaven. Seeing Jesus' command of scripture, the scribe gets right to the point, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Can you see the crowd silenced by the question, then gathering in around him, leaning in, eager to hear what Jesus will say? Which commandment will he choose? Is it possible to choose? Aren't they all important? Which one will he choose?

The first, Jesus answered, is "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." Quoting Deuteronomy 6:4, Jesus lifts this command as the first of the Torah, the law, as the summary of the law's intent, pointing to love as the comprehensive fulfillment of what Torah is supposed to achieve. At the center of human life is the worship of Yahweh, who summons from within us an exhaustive and comprehensive kind of love directed toward God, a God who alone is worthy of receiving the love of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, a God who requires all that we are and all that we have to give.

But then Jesus does the unexpected, he expands his answer by offering a second. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Where does this come from? An obscure verse in Leviticus 19: 18. Listen to the verse that comes before it, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am Yahweh." Then Jesus does what no interpreter of Torah had done before: he combines them together. "There is no other commandment," Jesus said, note the singular, "greater than these."

The scribe is impressed and affirms Jesus' response. In fact, the scribe goes on to say that Jesus' answer is "much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." This is a remarkable response, if you think about it, because it seems to undermine the

religious practices of the temple in Jerusalem, because that's the only place where sacrifices were offered. It critiques and subverts the temple practices as distractions or distortions of what God hopes for us. Is Jesus saying the temple institution is irrelevant? He seems to challenge the religious professionals (the Sadducees and Pharisees, the clergy looking on) who have a vested interest in preserving religious institutions. One might see this as a criticism of first century Judaism, but it's more correctly a strong indictment against *any* form of religious expression where meaningless practices and empty rituals become false surrogates for the kind of life Yahweh is calling us to. Ironically, Jesus is pointing out how the trappings of religion can actually take us very far from the kingdom of God. Ironically, religion can – it doesn't have to, but it can and often does – hinder us from the love of God, neighbor, and self that thrives in the kingdom of God. Our religiosities and false pieties can take us from far from the kingdom.

When Jesus combines these two verses together into one commandment he sets humanity off in a *new*, yet *old* direction, by putting love at the center of human experience. New, because he does it with terrific force; old, because it's the plan of God from the beginning of time. We might take this command for granted, since we probably grew up hearing these verses, trying to follow them, but it's really radical and innovative because they put love at the heart of the human experience. These verses link the love of God with love of neighbor and implied within this is the love of self. The love of God is linked with love of neighbor, implying the self. God, neighbor, and self form a trinity of love that is inextricably linked and cannot be separated without being guilty of withholding love from one or more of the parties. Here are some implications of this. It's while nigh impossible to love God and fear your neighbor (and I say, "fear" because as scripture directs, the opposite of love is not hate, but fear, it is fear that can lead to hatred, separation, and violence).¹ It's difficult to love your neighbor, but fear yourself; that is hate yourself, inflict violence upon oneself. Is it really love we offer our neighbor if we despise ourselves? Loving one's self is the precondition for love of neighbor, which means when we fear our neighbor we are making a strong claim about how we view ourselves. And is it really love we offer to God when we fear ourselves? The love of one's self is grounded first and foremost in God's love for us and our love for God. Everything else flows from this – particularly love of neighbor.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There's a little poem that goes like this: "I sought my soul, and the soul I could not see. I sought my God and God eluded me. I sought my neighbor and found all three." We need to remember that in the call

¹ See 1 John 4: 18.

to love one's neighbor Jesus was not simply echoing a general moral standard of his day assumed by all, it would have been considered the height of foolishness. To care for anyone beyond one's kith and kin was considered ridiculous. One's obligation to one's neighbor was debatable, in question. In Luke's version of this text, the scribe discounts Jesus' comment about loving one's neighbor as oneself. He immediately replies, "But who is my neighbor?" as if to say, that's ludicrous. It's in response to the scribe that Jesus offers the parable of the Good Samaritan. Who is your neighbor? *Your neighbor is the fellow human being you meet along the road but prefer to step over.* Loving one's neighbor means reaching out to people whom you might fear or loathe or despise. It means caring for those in need, sharing their suffering and their joy, being present. It means being slow to condemn or judge or criticize. It means building up instead of tearing someone down. It means treating those whom we encounter with holy honor and respect because they too bear the image of holiness, the image God like us. Such is the life of the saints.

Who is my neighbor? My "friend," Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), offered a good answer. "One's neighbor," he said, "is one's equal. One's neighbor is not the beloved, for whom you have passionate preference, nor your friend, for whom you have passionate preference. Nor is your neighbor, if you are well-educated, the well-educated person with whom you have cultural equality – for with your neighbor you have before God the equality of humanity. Nor is your neighbor one who is of higher social status than you, that is, insofar as he is of higher social status he is not your neighbor, for to love him because he is of higher status than you can very easily be preference and to that extent, self-love. Nor is your neighbor one who is inferior to you, that is, insofar as he is inferior he is not your neighbor, for to love one because he is inferior to you can very easily be partiality's condescension and to that extent self-love. No, to love one's neighbor means equality. Your neighbor is every man, for on the basis of distinctions he is not your neighbor.... He is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God."²

Who is my neighbor? *Everyone.* Who is my neighbor? *The one who stands before me, this holy other who bears within his life or her life the very image of the God who summons me to love with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength.* In our love of neighbor we discover who really are (and aren't) and who God really is (and isn't). This then becomes the foundation for doing mission, why mission not an option for the church, why mission is so much more than charity – charity is often offered to those "less fortunate," but we give not to those who are less, but equal with us, because they bear the image of God.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses* [1847]. Trans. by Howard and Edna Hong; Preface by R. Gregor Smith (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 72.

We give ourselves to others who equally bear the image of God as we do, giving ourselves away to others because our neighbor – whoever he or she is, wherever he or she is - bears the image of God which summons us to love and ushers us right into the heart of the kingdom of God.

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