

Commanded to Love

Epistle: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Gospel: Matt. 22:34-45

Proper 25:

Today's Gospel passage comes towards the end of Jesus' conflict with the scribes and the Pharisees. For some time now, they have been firing questions at him and now comes what has been called his "final exam" (Rev. Tom Long). A lawyer steps up: "So teacher, which commandment is the greatest? Give it to us straight. What is the essence of life"?

In answer, Jesus quotes the Shema, Judaism's most fundamental declaration of faith: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind". But unwilling to leave it at that, he adds another commandment that is "like" the first: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

It sounds so simple. But how can we love God or anyone else just because we are commanded to do so? In today's often romantic world, love tends to be all about feelings. We talk about "falling in love". In this sense, love is something that just happens – that we have no control over. But here, Jesus suggests that love is less an emotion than an act of will. When he tells us to love our neighbours, he is not talking about meeting them with a cosy emotional glow. Instead, he is telling us to love them in the sense of being willing to work for their well being by being honest and enduring friends.

There is an old story of an absent minded musical maestro who was racing up Seventh Avenue in New York to a rehearsal when a stranger stopped him. "Excuse me", said the stranger, "Can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall"? "Yes", answered the maestro, "Practice"!

Jesus would have given a similar answer if asked about love of God and neighbour. Love in the Jewish and Christian sense is not about feelings. Rather it is a skill, requiring the same kind of practice it takes to become an accomplished musician, or athlete, or scientist. The psychiatrist Erich Fromm has written that loving is an art, the apex of what it means to be human. If we want to become full human beings we must slowly, carefully learn the art of loving (*The Art of Loving*, 1956).

Anyone who has been in love will know the initial heady feeling. But true, lasting love cannot be sustained by emotion alone. Love of another person entails an arduous journey, out of self absorption and into caring for another through good times and bad. The marriage vows which many of us have taken say nothing about feelings. Two people promise to love, honour

and keep each other, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful as long they both shall live. This is a promise to act in certain ways. Couples who have been together for a long time will know that enduring love is the result of commitment and promise, not the cause. Part of the miracle of marriage is that the keeping of those promises over time leads people to feel more “in love” than when they first began.

Jesus tells us that love is the *sine qua non*, the essence of life. But loving God is not enough. We are also commanded to love our neighbours. That law is also cited in the Torah, but this was the first time anyone had put the two together. Jesus is telling us that you cannot love God without loving your neighbour; to love your neighbour is an active form of loving God.

For Christians, God and neighbour are brought together in the person of Jesus, who reminds us that whatever we do for the hungry, the naked and the prisoner, we do for him. So in the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is Jesus who is the man in the ditch, beaten, bruised and left to die, and we, his neighbours are the ones with the choice: do we bind up his wounds and care for him, or do we pass by on the other side?

How, you may ask, can I love those difficult neighbours when I don't even like them? The answer is simple. You don't have to like them, you just have to love them. Jesus was never interested in whether a disciple liked someone. In fact, while Jesus loved everyone, including his enemies, we may well wonder how much he liked the Pharisees, whom he disparaged as hypocrites, snakes and vipers, full of greed and self indulgence – and quite a bit more.

Paul too, sometimes had difficulty liking those whom he served. In his letter to the Thessalonians which we heard earlier, he comments on how he had been mistreated at Philippi. And according to Luke's account in Acts (17), things were not much better in Thessalonica, where a rowdy mob attacked some of Paul's supporters, resulting in him fleeing the town. But in spite of this and many other attacks on himself and his followers, Paul's message was always one of love, which “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7).

Love of neighbour requires practice, the daily work of living out love. It means changing nappies and doing the dishes, volunteering at the food bank, making masks, or telling a friend she is drinking too much. It means ensuring that our business and other decisions are based on the welfare of others, or the good of the community. Put simply, love means looking out and caring for the other, even if that may sometimes mean just leaving a person alone.

It's the same with love of God. Like love of neighbour, love of God does not have to be all about emotions. Sometimes it just means showing up. Last week David talked about Mother Teresa, who left the convent which she loved, and went to work in the slums in Calcutta. For a long time she found herself unable to feel religious joy, confidence in her faith, or even a very strong connection to God. But she kept showing up for prayers every day, and she kept showing up to serve. Gradually, after a number of years her faith and confidence grew until finally she became blessed with a true sense of joy, fulfilment and deep love for God and neighbour.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind ... and you shall love your neighbour as your self”. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”.

And on these two commandments hang the essence of life and the hope of the world.

Amen

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