

God and Neighbor

Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17, Matthew 22: 34-46

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Matthew 22: 36

By the Reverend. Joanna Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, Georgia
October 23 2005

Recently I ordered a lovely little book from Amazon.com entitled *The Lutheran Handbook*. No, I am not considering becoming a Lutheran, but I do love this blue paperback, which is full of great information about the Christian tradition in general and the Lutheran tradition in particular. It also offers great practical advice such as:

How to stay awake in church (arrive early and find the coffee pot).

How to avoid being burned at the stake (stay away from witchcraft).

And what to bring to a pot luck supper. Hint: Dessert is the favorite dish, and all the most popular pot luck desserts contain two essential ingredients: flour and fudge.

The Scripture section of the Lutheran Handbook identifies the seven funniest stories in the Bible. My personal favorite: God tells a man named Gideon, who is leading a great army, that he needs to pare down his army and tells him to take all his soldiers over to a stream. They are all to drink water from

the stream, and Gideon is to select only the 300 men who lap the water like dogs to go into battle against the Midianites. Yes, that is in the Bible.

I know I should stop this, but I love the section entitled, “The Five Grossest Stories in the Bible.” I don’t have a favorite in this category but if you are reading the Bible from beginning to end, and you come across the names Eglon and Ehud, don’t read any further.

I also was drawn to the chapter entitled, “The Five Weirdest Laws in the Old Testament,” one of which is, “You shall not wear clothes of linen and wool woven together. No mention is made of polyester.”

Today, we turn to what is considered to be, not the weirdest law, but the greatest law in both the Old and the New Testament. Why is it called the greatest law? Because Jesus said it was. One day the religious leaders were testing him, as they had been doing for some time. They asked him which commandment in the law he considered to be the one that was indispensable. Jesus answered by quoting Moses’ first law from the 6th chapter of Deuteronomy: ““You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”” This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

These two commandments are the foundation for all the rest of the law.

They are the foundation on which human life and human society are to be built. You shall love God with everything that you've got and you shall love your neighbor, not instead of yourself, but at least as much as you love yourself.

Notice Jesus' repetition of the word "all": all your mind, all your soul, all your heart, not just some of it, but all of it. What was it I said over the babies a moment ago? "You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." For all your life you will belong to him. Throughout all eternity, you will belong to him. All of you belongs to him-mind, soul, and heart. Here the word "heart" means more than a feeling. In the Hebrew tradition, the heart was understood to be the source, the center of everything a person wants and does. You shall love God with all your being.

Not long ago, I spoke with a young family man who has done well in his vocation but he has begun to wonder what his life is about. He called and made an appointment and came to see me and said, "You know, I work all the time and I like what I do, but I can't figure out where am I going anymore. You can't live for your work and for the money you earn, can you?"

I told him it sounded as if he had a very ancient problem. “Really?” he said. “Yes,” I answered. It is a problem that many of us have, myself included. The problem is called idolatry. The problem is making yourself the most important thing in your life, more important to you than God, more important than other people. There’s no other word for it, I wish there were, but it is idolatry, pure and simple.

I think of a story I heard some time ago about another busy father who was building his career and rarely got home in the evening before his children were in bed. One night, his daughter asked her mother where her daddy was. Her mother patiently explained that he was behind at the office and was working late trying to catch up. The child asked, “Why don’t they put Daddy in a slower group?”

There is a cure for idolatry. Jesus prescribed the cure. You shall love God fully and completely. And how do you do that? The second commandment gives us a great insight as to how we can live out the first commandment. You love God as you love your neighbor, while you love your neighbor. When you love your neighbor, you discover that you are close to the heart of God, because our neighbors are already right there, in God’s heart. We are all sons and daughters of the same God. And when we actually love ourselves in the sense of honoring the person, the human being, the body,

the spirit that is us and that God created in the first place, when we get connected with our true selves, then we are also connected with God and with our neighbor. It's all one reality. It is all one love. We are all God's precious children. You cannot not give a hoot about yourself or about other people and be close to God.

I read about a grown son whose very distinguished father had died. The son gave the homily at his father's memorial service, testifying to the fact that his dad, a successful, busy physician, had figured out how be true to himself, how to love God, and how to care for a great number of people. "My father cherished my mother. He cherished his patients and because he loved them, they loved him back. He was a generous man, always giving more than he received. My father lived by the dictum, 'When you were born, you were crying and everybody else was smiling, so live your life so that when you die you will be smiling and everybody else will be crying.' As he lay dying, my father was filled with the spirit of gratitude for all of life and for its blessings." (1)

Here was a man who loved with all his heart and all his mind and all his soul. Don't you want a life like that? Don't you want to live as fully as you can? How do you do that? By getting over yourself and understanding that God made us for love.

The poet Walt Whitman wrote, “Behold, I don’t give lectures or a little charity. When I give, I give myself.” Where does a capacity like that come from? I believe we get it from our Creator, the Holy One of Israel, the “Generous Giver of Life” (2) How **can** we dole out puny little portions of love to God, or settle for a couple of cans of soup for the Thanksgiving food drive to demonstrate our concern for our neighbor? If God loves us fully and completely, then surely we can give of ourselves with grateful, generous hearts. After, all “we were created not only to get but to give.” (3)

When Jesus is asked a question about the great commandment in Luke’s gospel, he responds, as he does in Matthew, about loving with all your heart. The questioner goes on to ask, after Jesus has said to love your neighbor as you love yourself, “Who is my neighbor? Jesus answers with the story of “a certain man” who was going down the road and fell into the hands of robbers who beat him, and striped him, and left him half dead. Two other travelers, a priest and a Levite, saw the man in trouble, but did nothing. Then a Samaritan passes, sees the injured man, does what need to be done, and then some. He takes the man to an inn, and as he leaves him in the care of the innkeeper, he says, I’ll come back and pay you more if I haven’t given you enough money to care for him. Whatever it costs, I will do.”

Did you notice that we know absolutely nothing about the man in the ditch?

We do not know whether or not he was foolish or wise, whether he was deserving or undeserving. He was a human being in need. No one **had** to show mercy to him. Two did not. One did.

I spoke last Tuesday to a friend who is a pastor of a Presbyterian church in Baton Rouge. She is the mother of two young daughters. She is married to a husband who has been fighting a malignancy for eighteen months. She leads a busy congregation. Her voice was full of joy when we spoke because she and her congregation have had the privilege of running a shelter in their church for families who have newborn babies who had no place to live after Hurricane Katrina. “Patti,” I said, “how did you get into that?”

She said, “They called from the public hospital and asked me if we could help. How can you say no to a question like that?”

How can you say “no” when there is genuine human need staring you in the face? “No” is not an option. When God is your ultimate point of reference, you find within yourself a surprising capacity for compassion.

I asked a rabbi friend, not long ago, where he thought the human characteristic of altruism came from. Why do some people seem to have the capacity to care about others, and some people don't? I expected my rabbi friend, who is a very learned man, to give me an erudite answer, laced with

theology, psychology, and biology all mixed up together. Instead, he said, “You know, Joanna, I think you get it from your parents.” He went on to tell me about research that shows that children who have observed a mother, a father, or another admired older person, acting lovingly and generously, are likely to grow up to do the same. Parents who never seem to notice anybody else except the people who live under their own roofs have children who grow up not to care very much.

One of my favorite books is about rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. One of my favorite people in that book is Polish woman, a Christian, named Theresa Weerstra, the married young mother with three children. A friend asks her if she will take in a four-year-old Jewish girl, whose parents are gone. She answers yes. Her husband is not so sure. They talk that evening about whether they should take in the little girl or not. “You’re putting our children at risk,” he says to her. “What’s going to happen to our family?” She responds, “We don’t want to be like those two people in the story of the Good Samaritan, do we? You don’t want to be the Levite and me be the priest. We can’t turn our backs. This could be one of our children; this could be your mother needing shelter.” The little girl was taken in, and she turned out to be the first of 450 Jews, Allied pilots and Dutch children escaping German labor roundups that Theresa Weerstra and her family rescued during

the war. (4) All it takes is one set of eyes to see a neighbor who has a need and one heart to ask, “How can I say ‘no’?” These are the kinds of things that keep us human.

Over sixty of us went to see Tom Key in the *Cotton Patch Gospel*. He played the part of Jesus. Five times during the performance, he sang unaccompanied and in a haunting solo voice: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul and all your heart and all your mind.” Once, when he finished singing, he looked the audience squarely in the eye and said, “In a nutshell, that is what I came to earth to say.” Call the Lutherans. I believe we have heard the single most important thing there is to know.

Wouldn't it be grand if sixty of us, or a hundred and sixty of us, decided to stifle just a little bit of our self-love and really got going with God love and neighbor love? We really could do it. True religion is always a matter of the heart, the deep down core of who you are. I challenge each one of you to get your heart right. Stop working all the time, if you work all the time. Give more of your time to the people who love you. Tune in to your family, tune in to your neighbors, tune in to people in this city, strangers, who might be in trouble and need your help. You need their help, too. They will keep you human.

Take a page from Mother Teresa's book. Just before she died, she spoke at a prayer breakfast. She was introduced as "the greatest woman in the world" to the audience. When she stood up to speak, her first words were, "I'm nothing close to being the greatest woman in the world, but I will tell you the greatest thing about my life. I have been able to be a tiny pencil in the hand of God, someone through whom God writes love letters to the world." It makes you wonder what our lives are all about, doesn't it? Everything, and I do mean everything, hangs on this: our willingness to love God with all we've got and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. So it has been and so it will always be, world without end. Amen.

Notes:

(1) Bennett J. Sims, *Turning Point*, the Institute of Servant leadership, Vol.17, number, October, 2000.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage*, Anchor Books, 1994, p.173-174.