

The Impossible Commandment
Matthew 22:34-40

I suspect for most folks it is easier to think of this commandment in a particular sense than in a general one. It is, I suspect, easier to think of someone you know when considering the possibility of loving one's neighbor as oneself.

I confess then, to a certain amount of contrariness regarding this commandment. For me, it is easier to think in general than in particular. Now this is due to a neighbor I had one time. If you've never had a nuisance neighbor, well, I don't recommend it. It will try your patience on the matter of loving your neighbor.

Now generally speaking, I happened to like the guy, but there is just something about living in close proximity to a womanizing, pot-growing, 3:00 a.m. bass-playing, dogs running free kind of guy that will try your patience. I knew I had reached an all time low when I put on my bathrobe in the middle of the night, stepped out into the bracing cold to go pound on his door yet again, and upon approaching the door encountered the neighbor from the other side on the same mission. At such times, this is not the greatest commandment, it is the *impossible* commandment.

To be perfectly frank, loving this neighbor was going to require something akin to sainthood, and to be even more frank, I wasn't interested in sainthood, I was interested in sleep. So I feel that I have a certain amount of authority in experience that can only be gained by living through it.

This little vignette encapsulates a certain type of experience in attempting to love one's neighbor. It's always harder when well, it's harder, and at times, it seems well nigh unto impossible. And there are times when we may will ourselves to do it, to love our

neighbors as ourselves, and fail, much as Paul willed himself to do good and found himself doing the very opposite of what he willed instead.

There are, of course, some layers of meaning in what Jesus says regarding the greatest commandment, as we commonly call it. At the same time, Jesus is crystal clear in his meaning and that means something for us. Likewise, this choice of which commandment is the greatest gives us insight into who God is and what God is about. Finally, I want to suggest that it does have a claim upon our lives even now.

When Jesus is approached by a lawyer, it's not in our modern sense of the practice of law. We see what happens in our court system as quite separate from our biblical scholarship. But when the term, *the Law* is used in the Bible, it refers to the heart of the Torah, the Jewish Scriptures, the study of which Jesus had presumably acquainted himself sufficiently to be a rabbi, a teacher of the law. So the lawyer is the ancient equivalent of a modern biblical scholar and according to Tom Long, the lawyer's question is not so innocent as it seems. It is a temptation to offer an easy way, a way to understand the law that will perhaps leave the follower a loophole.

Long writes,

“What is sinister about the Lawyer's question? Jewish scholars who counted the laws of Moses came up with 613 separate commandments. The lawyer is asking Jesus to pick one out of this number as ‘the greatest’, thereby exposing him to criticism over the 612 commandments he did not choose. The lawyer is licking his chops over the prospect of embarrassing Jesus with a follow up question. But Jesus leaves no room for a follow up. His answer shows that the lawyer, like the tempter in the wilderness, is no match for Jesus. The first part of Jesus' response quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, ‘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. This verse would have been well know to all his hearers, since it formed part of the Shema, a key element in Jewish worship. Devout Jews would have recited this verse several times a day and would have known it by heart. Then Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18 as a second commandment, which is like the first, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’¹ In other words, every word of the Bible Jesus would have read. Confronted with a question of faith, Jesus answers by quoting an old creed of Judaism. Which is also to say that when his faith was challenged, he returned to what he had learned from childhood. It’s like answering the question, ‘what do you believe?’ with ‘I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.’ That doesn’t just happen overnight. Neither does learning to love a neighbor. Learning to love a neighbor – really to love all people – is an exercise in *learned behavior*. I don’t want to suggest that it is easy to learn to love contrary people, but I do want to suggest that learning to love is part of learning Christian faith, and not the easy part. Memorizing the Ten Commandments is easy. Well, it’s easy enough. I had to rememorize them for an Old Testament final when I was in seminary, and they more or less stuck. But learning to *love*, if it is to be an authentic love, is an exercise in practice. It is an exercise in faith practice. It is an exercise in deliberate cultivation of the practices that lead to the faith we want to form. And in this regard, Jesus points us back to an old creed, the sort of thing one memorizes so that when you need the words of faith, you aren’t looking in the index of a book, they’re just there. They’re just part of you.

¹ Long, Thomas G. Matthew Westminster Bible Companion, p255

That is the premise behind cultivation of faith. We don't change God or God's relationship with us through our actions, we change our way of relating to the world around us so that we reflect God's relationship with us. It's like when we teach young children that giving is important by giving them canned goods to take to church to share with others, or hand them our tithe envelopes to put in the plate, or when we adults seek to frame our faith by participating in study so that we aren't just pooling ignorance when we open our mouths to speak, or when we encounter the need for forgiveness and we understand that *we* have to forgive so that *we* can be changed. It's all part of learning to be faithful. And it just doesn't happen haphazardly.

Jesus pulls up this old creed of Judaism to orient and ground his response in the deliberately cultivated and deliberately passed down faith of his community.

Loving our neighbors as ourselves – not to mention loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, is necessarily learned behavior.

Jesus draws on the tradition of the community – and in this regard most surely confounds the lawyer, who in our common parlance today, was likely playing gotcha games with the law. He confounds him by pointing him back to the heart of the law which is beyond dispute and **the heart of the law is love.**

Have you ever thought of the law that way? Have you ever thought of the law as an expression of love?

In many ways, I think that goes against the very fabric of what it means to understand the law because we so often engage in convenient anachronism. We think that because we mean law in the sense of courtrooms and judges and the constitution that God means it that way too. And in the sense of providing order, I suppose that isn't too inaccurate an

understanding. The Law, as God gives it, does provide order. But that isn't its primary intent, and that is where a Biblical understanding of the law differs from our modern understanding. Modern understanding, at least since the time of Thomas Hobbes if not before, is that the law is a social contract, which is roughly understood thus: don't kill me and I won't kill you. Don't harm me, and I won't harm you. Don't steal from me and I won't steal from you. This is a gross simplification of a complex concept but it serves our purposes today. The goal is to avoid the state of nature, in which life is nasty, brutish and short and it's a fearful prospect.

The Law as *God* gives it is meant to be more than a provision of order. It is meant to be the basis for a community that distinguishes itself from all other communities by its relationship with the one, loving, living God. All other communities will be blessed by the law as they see who God is through the community God has called into being in the giving of the law. And when the lawyer comes to Jesus looking either to embarrass him or to find a loophole, he demonstrates his lack of understanding of the law, because that isn't what God is about. Jesus answer points him back to his roots, to his faith – to God. Jesus answer points him back to his God because the answer that Jesus gives is the very essence of who God is. It is the reason that Jesus can define himself by communing with sinners as the text so often reminds us, because Jesus understands that the whole thing is an expression of love, not an expression of fear. It is the reason why when Jesus' righteousness encounters sin, rather than being made unclean his righteousness is not profaned but rather gives grace to sinners.

What is sinister about the question is that it misses the point completely. What is sinister is that it would replace a life-giving relationship with God and neighbor with a

transactional contract the sole purpose of which is to codify and nail down how we relate to each other. That's not who God is!

We can't love our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength if that is who we understand God to be! Try if you wish, but as an exercise of faith, it has failed for me. It has failed for most who have tried it. It fails because it replaces the living God who loves us and defines God's very own self in loving community with a dead God who is containable in a few short words. That's idolatry, for what it's worth.

Instead, Jesus offers an alternative, and ironically it is the alternative that has been there all along, contained in the very credo of the faith: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. That is not consonant with legal reductionism.

When Jesus draws on that old creed and points us back to the heart of God, it is to reorient the lawyer, and anyone who will listen, to a greater truth, and that greater truth is this: the commandment tells us who God is.

Books and books have been written on the Trinity – that doctrine of the church that declares three in one and one in three and tries to doggedly hang on to monotheism while simultaneously offering us three different faces – hypostases, or expressions, if you will – of who God is. And fixating on the paradox of our monotheism with our triune God risks missing the point. The point is that God has defined God's very own self in community – specifically in a community of self-giving love: one God, in a dance of love and community as God's very nature. Getting hung up on the numbers misses the point: and the point is that God is as God wants us to be.

Drawing on that old creed gives us insight into God's character of self-giving communal love – and that matters! It's who God is! And, it's who and how God wants us to be.

That is the point: God is as God wants us to be.

In the beginning, the Bible says, God said, "Let us make humanity in our image, in our likeness...and so God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them."²

God defines God's very own self in communal, self giving love and we are made in God's image, and the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. These are not mutually exclusive thoughts – they are tied together in the practice of faith.

We don't always live this way, do we? Do we live as though we are made in God's image of loving and valuing each other? If I harbored any illusions that were the case, they could be swiftly removed by watching Fox, MSNBC or CNN. If we believe the image of God remains intact in any way upon us, that notion can be summarily dismissed by watching cable news.

But it does appear that Jesus is calling us back to our humanity in this answer. To be human, to be in God's image is to be at one with our creator and our neighbor.

We aren't.

But Jesus is – and that is the fully human part of the old Chalcedonian formula of fully human, fully divine that you may have come across in church life.

And therein is our hope, again: not that we are faithful to God's vision for us, but that Jesus is, and in *that* we are redeemed and given hope.

² Genesis 1:26-27

Think about that: God made us to be human, and we live beneath our humanity, so God came to be human for us so that we may be made whole. We need to think about that or this commandment is just words, words, words. We need to think of this, or our faith is just words, words, words.

That kind of makes the problem of a nuisance neighbor pale, now doesn't it?

That kind of makes any dehumanization of anyone impossible, now doesn't it?

This idea that we should love God, love our neighbors, and in the process, value ourselves can sound a bit like a broken record at times, I suppose. But that is the Gospel, and if you don't think it needs to be repeated over and over and over again – go out there, go out there a while. ***It'll beat you down if you don't have a vision of redemption.***

This isn't a question of nuisance neighbors, it's a question of living into our baptism, because in Jesus Christ, we all encounter our humanity anew, and in baptism we are called to live into that humanity. In the end, this is who God is. What we're making sense of is nothing more than this: it's not about you, and it is. It's not about you because it's about God and who God is, and it is about you because who God is, is the God who loves.

You know the problem with love? People think it's weak. People think it's sentimental.

People think it's romantic nonsense, and if not, Hollywood will quickly help you get there. If we don't think in God's terms, maybe it is.

But that's not God's love. And it's not what God calls us to practice.

There is no story of love I can think of that will sum this up short of the gospel. But that's the point: because of Jesus, this is not the impossible commandment, it's who we are.

Think about it. Think about it. Now live into it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.