

The Jesus Creed: Part 2-Love Your Neighbor

Love is at the heart of our worship and at the center of our lives. Last week I preached on the Great Commandment, which New Testament scholar Scott McKnight refers to as “The Jesus Creed”. When Jesus is asked, “What is the first commandment or most important commandment, Jesus did a wonderful thing: He took two commandments from the Hebrew Scriptures and made them one. In our time, we recognize them as the beautiful verses from Deuteronomy 6:5, the essential teaching in the Jewish faith, and from Leviticus 19:18. In doing so, Jesus wove together the love of God and the love of humanity, thus putting people above rituals and rules, love above the law.

Last week we focused on the love of God. This week I want to focus on the love of neighbor.

What does it mean to love our neighbor?

The Gospel reading itself doesn’t spell out exactly what loving our neighbor looks like- it varies according to the situations and circumstances of our daily lives. Also it differs according to the times we live in. For instance, in these days of the coronavirus, one of the ways we love our neighbor is to wear a mask! That’s not what I would have thought of if I tried to answer this question a year ago.

The French mystic, Simone Weil, in her book “Waiting on God” equated Christian love with the work of attention. She writes:

“Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention... The love of neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to them: ‘What are you going through?’ “. And then taking the time to listen and to care.

In Luke’s account of the Great Commandment, we find an emphasis on the “love of neighbor”. In answering the question, ‘Who is My Neighbor?’, Jesus shares what has to be one of his most famous parables: the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Unlike the first two, the priest and the Levite, the Samaritan not only notices the man lying half-dead on the side of the road, he also stops, and takes the time to help him. Why? Well, according to Luke, the Samaritan was moved by compassion: first of all, he saw him-truly saw him.

2.

In Ann Lamott's book, *Hallelujah Anyway*, which is about showing mercy, she shares some wisdom from a priest friend of hers, Father Ed Dowling, who once said, "Heaven is sometimes just a new pair of glasses....when we put them on, we see the awful person, sometimes even ourselves, a bit more gently (pg.12). When something is holy, It means it is 'of God'. Compassion is holy In that sense-it is 'of God'. It opens our eyes to see, not a victim, not a problem, but a real human being-to see them as God sees them. Compassion also opens our hearts. Poet, Mary Oliver once wrote, "If the doors of my heart ever close, I am as good as dead".

When our eyes and hearts are open end, we are moved to care and to action. Compassion also helps us set aside our fears, and do what the Spirit is leading us to do, or, we could say, do what the situation calls for to the best of our ability. Like a first responder, the Samaritan , "bandaged his neighbor's wounds, put him on his donkey, and carried him to the nearest inn and where they took care of him." (Luke 10: 34-35).

In the parable, Jesus lifts up the Samaritan as an example. For he practiced love by showing care, acting in courage, and demonstrating generosity.

This brings us to the second passage for today. In Hebrews 13:1, there are two words for love, although it may not be clear at first: Let me read it again for you:

"Let your love be mutual. Show hospitality to the stranger" The first one "philadelphia" is translated as 'love'. We're familiar with the city of 'brotherly love'. The word "philadelphia" refers to the love between various members of the church, the beloved community. At the Last Supper, Jesus gave us a new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you". What's new is that we Jesus' life and his death as a model of love. During the meal, Jesus got up, wrapped a towel around his waist, and took the time to wash his disciples' feet. Afterwards he said, "As I have done to you so you should do for one another". That means serving one another and caring for one another.

3.

This high calling to 'let our love be mutual' can be a challenge right now because tensions are so high due to the Pandemic and the impending election. But we are called to do our best, and practice mutual forgiveness for those times we get it wrong, or miss the mark.

The second word for 'love' in Hebrews 13:1 is "xenophilia", which means, literally, 'the love of the stranger'. It is translated, "Show hospitality to strangers". It is the exact opposite of 'xenophobia' which means 'fear of the stranger'-which is one of the most prevalent fears we are contending with in our country today.

To practice 'xenophobia', on the other hand, means welcoming the stranger. To open our hearts to them. Last Saturday, at the Annual Meeting of the Maine Conference of the UCC, the theme was "Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you". One speaker we got to listen to was a young man by the name of Abdi Nur Iftin. He is a Somalian immigrant who is an American citizen now. He fled his home country of Somalia as a boy because of the brutal civil war there. For a while he was a refugee in Kenya. He learned quickly that he was not welcome there. Not because of the color of his skin, but just because he was from Somalia. It's quite a story how he ended up here in America(he won a visa lottery). However when he got here to our country, he soon found out that he was not welcome here by many either, simply because he was Moslem. But he was also looked upon suspiciously by some because he is black too. Thankfully, he was hosted graciously by a family in Yarmouth, Maine. Since then he has become a citizen, working primarily as an interpreter in hospitals and in the court system. He has published his first book: "Call Me American".

One of the things that Abdi stressed is that in order to truly welcome a stranger, it was important for folks who knew him to get the word out that 'not all Somalians are out to get you'; the vast majority "are looking for a peaceful life like you and me." He also said he feels most welcome when he is accepted along with his differences. In other words, welcoming the stranger means accepting their differences, their otherness as well- remembering that what we truly share with one another is our common humanity in all of its wonderful diversity!

4.

Last week I began my sermon on the Great Commandment by sharing a story about Mr. Rogers. This week I'd like to close with a quote from Mr. Rogers.

"The more I think about it, the more I wonder if *God* and *neighbor* are somehow One. "Loving God. Loving neighbor"-the same thing? For me, coming to recognize that God loves *every* neighbor is the ultimate appreciation! ("The World According to Mister Rogers", pg.163)