



THE SIMPLEST THING OF ALL

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Leviticus 19:9-18; Mark 12:28-34

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Growing up in South Carolina, the ocean has always been a part of my life. I suspect it is true for you as well. I remember the blazing sun and heat; I recall hopping across the melting asphalt and burning sand to get to the cool wet sand near the water. We would body surf on the waves and float in the bathtub-like water for hours on end. Sometimes, the cross currents would carry us down the shore, and we would have to keep an eye on where we started. There were places we knew not to swim because the dangerous undertow and rip tides were impossible to navigate even for the strongest swimmer.

The simple command to love God and love your neighbor sounds as easy as floating in the shallow warm waters of the ocean. It sounds so peaceful and nice. After all, who is not in favor of love? More often than not, loving your neighbor can be more like getting in over our heads, battling the cross currents, and swimming against the tide. Loving the neighbor can go against the currents of culture, fear, suspicion, personal hurts, and even ancient hatreds.

So where does Jesus get this business about the importance of love? Aren't there other things in life that are just as important as love? The Jewish people faced the question about what is important to live a holy life before God. The Torah, or law, guided their daily lives as they sought to do the right thing in the eyes of God. To understand what the Lord required of them, they began to draw out the particular laws that the Lord commanded them to follow.

The 12th century Spanish physician and rabbi, Maimonides, helped the Jewish Community lift up the laws by which God called them to live. He was a significant figure in identifying the 613 biblical commandments that faithful Jews must keep. These commandments concern questions of food and farming, legal matters and business matters, ritual purity and worship, almsgiving and lending, clothing and hair, families and firstborns, priests and rulers, marriage and sexual relations, taxes and tithing, keeping Sabbath and celebrating religious holidays. The question arises, are all commandments equal in weight?

With the coming of Christ, we consider the commandments about ritual purity, sacrifices, food, and clothing to no longer have authority in our lives. How do we know which of the remaining laws are the most important?

A scribe once asked Jesus which of the commandments was first of all. Jesus gave the response that we know by heart, but often forget when our lives are busy, and we are pulled in too many directions. We forget what Jesus said when situations are complicated, our loyalties are divided, and the right thing seems beyond our grasp. Hear the simple truth:

The first [commandment] is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.

Jesus is not saying anything the people have never heard before. In fact, they come from the many commandments found in the Hebrew scriptures: the first from Deuteronomy and the second from Leviticus. What Jesus does is take from the 613 commandments these two commandments and declare them to be the greatest and most important. The two commandments are inseparable. They are the vertical and horizontal dimensions of our faith. It is not by accident these vertical and horizontal dimensions of our faith make up the cross. If we want to follow Jesus, then we love God and we love our neighbors.

We know the truth, but we struggle to practice it. When we began our ministry in eastern North Carolina, I was a part of a ministerial group that met for breakfast. One of the other pastors had spent years researching and writing articles trying to prove that you could love God, but you didn't have to love the neighbor. After years of trying to prove it, I think I would have moved on to more productive efforts like mowing the grass, washing the dog, or taking in laundry.

Loving the neighbor raises two questions. First, who is my neighbor? A teacher of the law asks Jesus this very question. In response he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. The neighbor is the one in need right there before us. Certainly, our family and our friends are our neighbors. Isn't it interesting that we sometimes have the hardest time giving time and attention to the very people who are closest to us? Certainly, our neighbors include the people around us in our neighborhood, church, and community. In the Islamic tradition, the neighbor has been defined as everyone who lives within 40 houses in each direction. This was before rapid transportation and instant communication. In our global society, how can we draw such narrow boundaries around the concept of neighbor?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the neighbor is a member of the covenant community, the people of God. Likewise in the New Testament, Jesus calls those within the church to love one another. The Bible does not stop there. The Old Testament commands us to love the stranger or the foreigner within our community as well as the member of the faith community.

Jesus makes the matter even more challenging. When he preaches in his home synagogue, he talks about how God, in a time of famine, provides for a foreign widow of Zarephath and how God, in a time when many people had leprosy, heals the foreign General Naaman from Syria. People grind their teeth in anger. To the shock and horror of the righteous, Jesus touches the leper. He heals an unclean woman, the Roman Centurion's servant, and the Canaanite woman's child. He eats with sinners, tax collectors, and people considered immoral. Need I say more? Yes. He teaches us to love our enemies and thereby transform them into friends; he does it on the cross when he says, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

What is so wonderfully exasperating about the Bible is that just when we would circle the wagons of our love, God says, "Wagon, Ho!" and calls us into a new and uncharted territory of love and compassion. At this very moment, who is the person you are having the most difficulty loving? At this very moment, what group of people is the hardest for you to accept and to treat with compassion? When we are honest with ourselves, we know who they are. We know what we are allowing to be a stumbling block in the path of following Jesus.

The second question is this: what does love require? Christian love is not about having warm, fuzzy, and sentimental feelings about everybody and everything. Before it is a disposition of the heart, Christian love is an act of the will. If we want to know what it means to love then we look at what Jesus did – what he taught, how he lived, and how he died. It is an action, not a feeling. Love is the giving of the self for the sake of others. God gave Jesus for the salvation of the world. Such love turns the other cheek, goes the extra mile, gives sacrificially, forgives from the heart, and pays attention to the neighbor in need. Such love is hard; it takes effort. That is the whole idea. It is harder to swim against the currents of indifference, resistance, and prejudice than it is to go with the flow. It takes effort to resist the tendency to hold a grudge, accept easy answers, and nurse old wounds.

In our reading from Leviticus, Moses is quite specific about what it means to love the neighbor. It means sharing your food with the poor; not defrauding or cheating those who work for you; taking special care of those with handicapping conditions; standing for justice in the community; not gossiping or speaking ill of others; not seeking revenge or harboring grudges; caring for the refugee and the immigrant. Although we live in a different culture and economy, we know how to apply the words of Moses to our time and out place. At the 11am service today, we will commission our newly trained Stephen Ministers who have made a commitment to provide support, encouragement, and care to people who are going through difficult times. This is certainly one way we love the neighbor.

Sometimes loving the neighbor is easy. It is like floating with friends in the warm waters of the sea. More often than not, loving the neighbor is hard. It is more like swimming with every ounce of strength we've got against the cross currents that so threaten life. Yet, there is no more profound joy to be had than the joy that comes from loving our neighbor.

At times, the church has been accused of being wishy-washy, not standing for anything, conforming to culture. If I were to cite one failure of the church, it would be the failure to love. I remember one long, rancorous presbytery meeting at which ordination issues and human sexuality were being discussed. One pastor got up and said that the church was in danger of sinking because it didn't stand for anything anymore. An elder from the church I served whispered to me, "The thing that bothered my children when they were growing up was not that the church didn't stand for anything, but that the church didn't practice enough love." We are to speak the truth, yes; but we are to speak the truth in love.

The former moderator of the General Assembly and beloved pastor Dr. Albert Currie Winn was fond of saying that the church can exist without a lot of things. It can exist without buildings, budgets, and programs, but it cannot exist without love. I don't think anyone could say it more simply. If we want to simplify our lives, then we need to hear the simple truth that we were made to love God and love our neighbors. Through love, our lives come into balance, our burdens are lifted, and we float in the warm embrace of God's love.

Love is the simplest thing of all.