

PROPER 25, PENTECOST 22, YEAR A, OCTOBER 29, 2023

A young antagonist approached the famous Rabbi Hillel and requested that he teach him the whole of the Torah while he stood on one foot. Hillel responded: "What you find hateful do not do to another. This is the whole of the Law. Everything else is commentary."

In today's Gospel, Jesus is asked the question: "Which commandment of the Law is the greatest?" Jesus says, love God, love your neighbor. The rest is commentary. Sometimes in reading the Bible and in the practice of our faith, we tend to view Christianity as a set of rules to live by. Jesus, however, is saying something quite different. Christianity isn't a set of rules as much as a faith based on an underlying premise which is the fundamental task to love God and to love our neighbor.

What Jesus wants us to know this morning is that these two commandments are deeply intertwined. As Audrey West wrote in *The Christian Century*, "Do you want to know how to love God with your whole self? Practice loving your neighbor. Do you want to know how to love your neighbor? Practice loving God. Repeat, then do it again."

Yet these two simple commandments are easier said than done, aren't they? After all, who is my neighbor and what does it mean to love my neighbor and to love God? Love in this context is not a feeling. We aren't being commanded to feel a certain way. It isn't about liking or even being fond of someone. In this context, love is all about commitment. When I love God, I am committed to care about what God cares about in the world. That means, as Bishop Curry says, "I refuse to accept and to acquiesce to the way things are. Rather I pray and work for the way things could be. When I love my neighbor, I am committed to their wellbeing just like I am committed to my own wellbeing. I'm committed to their wellbeing, whether I like them or not. In fact, most, especially when I don't like them. There's a saying that goes like this. "I sought my soul, but my soul, I could not see. I sought my God, but my God alluded me. I sought my neighbor and I found all three."

What does loving your neighbor look like? The best answer I know comes from Paul and his famous passage from Corinthians that we read so often at weddings. Paul gives us almost a checklist for loving one's neighbor. It's a checklist for love in action. Love is patient, is kind, is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes, all things, endures, all things. Paul wants us to know that this is what love as commitment looks like. In order to love God, we must strive to be kind and patient generous, unassuming, humble, and polite to everyone we encounter. It means being willing to listen to our neighbor rather than lecturing them about what we think. It means striving to be pleasant and always to speak the truth, no matter what our neighbor says or does. It means doing all these things for the people we like the least as well as the people we like the most.

Think about it. How different would our nation and the world look if we lived this way, even 10% of the time? How much better off would we be if we learn to lead with love? Jesus linked our love of God with our love of neighbor. You cannot separate the two. To have one is to have the other, and to neglect one is to lose them both. This connection between claiming to love God and demonstrating that we love our neighbors

became so embedded in the early Christian traditions that all three Gospels contain a version of this week's story.

Tertullian, who lived from 155–220 CE, wrote, "Our care for the derelict and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy... See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other."

The gospel for this week reminds us of these distinctive signs" of our Christian communities. God is the creator of every human family, and the whole human family, such that there is no "them" but only "us." Honor and protect the dignity of every human being, for every person bears the image of God and is of equal value as I said last week.

Nicholas Kristof, an opinion columnist, also articulated something quite obvious that, nonetheless, must be said in his op-ed in the NYT this week: "When you care about some humans but not others, you've lost your humanity... If you care about human life only in Israel or only in Gaza, then you don't actually care about humanity... If your moral compass is attuned to the suffering of only one side, your compass is broken, and so is your humanity. The pain of a grieving Israeli parent is no different than the anguish of a mother or father in Gaza. There's no "hierarchy of human life," rather, "all lives are of equal value." Or as Wendy Farley said, "Love of God and of humanity are not two separate things, as if one could love God but shun humanity. Compassionate action reflects and mirrors the divine image. Love is not an emotion or obligation but is God present in the soul."

What would it cost us to take Jesus's version of love seriously? To practice and cultivate a depth of compassion that's gut-punching? To train ourselves into a hunger for justice so fierce and so urgent that we rearrange our lives in order to pursue it? To pray for the kind of empathy that causes our hearts to break? Do we even want to?

I don't think it's a coincidence or a mistake that Jesus inextricably links love of God with love of neighbor. Each reinforces, reinterprets, and revives the other. We cannot love God while we refuse to love what God loves. We cannot love God in a disinfected, disembodied way that doesn't touch the dirt and depth of this world. Our love is meant to be robust and hands-on and intimate.

Neither can we love ourselves or our neighbors in any meaningful, sustainable way if that love is not sourced and replenished in an abiding love for God. Only God's love is inexhaustible; if we cut ourselves off from the flow of God's compassion, we will quickly run dry. In other words, the motion of our hearts must be cyclical — love of God making possible and deepening our love of neighbor, and love of neighbor putting flesh and bones on our love for God.

So you see biblical love is not passive. Biblical love is something we do. Jesus declared love the be-all and end-all. The call is to weep with those who weep. To laugh with those who laugh. To touch the untouchables, feed the hungry, welcome the children, release the captives, forgive the sinners, confront the oppressors, comfort the oppressed, wash each other's feet, hold each other close, and tell each other the truth.

To put it more succinctly, Bishop Curry wrote in his book, "Love is the way. "My job is to plant seeds of love and to keep on planting them. It's folly to think that I can know the grand plan, how my small action fits into the larger hole. All I can do is check myself again and again. Do my actions look like love? If they are truly loving then they are part of the grand movement of love in the world, which is the movement of God in

the world. It is impossible to know in the moment how a small act of goodness will reverberate through time. This notion is empowering and it is frightening because it means that we are all capable of changing the world and responsible for finding those opportunities to protect and feed and grow and guide love. We can all plant seeds, though only some of us may be so lucky as to sit in their shade.”

So our task is to plant seeds of love. One simple encounter at a time. This is the work that God is calling us to do. It is the work our world needs the most. God’s love is the only thing that will pull us out of the hole that we have dug so deeply for ourselves. As Paul reminds us, “Without love I gain nothing. Without love. I am nothing.” Amen.