

The Second Way of Love
Love Your Neighbor As You Love Yourself
August 26, 2018

Just a reminder that I spent the summer preaching on the Ten Commandments, and these last two Sundays I am taking on the Two Great Commandments: Love your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Both of these commandments are in the Law of Moses, but when a lawyer comes up to Jesus and says, What's the greatest commandment, Jesus puts them together....Love your God. Love your neighbor. If you're only going to do two things, that about wraps it up, doesn't it? In fact, Jesus says, All the law and prophets hang on these two commands.

This passage is from Matthew's Gospel, but I love how St. Luke tells this story. Luke has this same story about a man coming up to Jesus, and asking, What is the greatest commandment? In Luke, as in Matthew, Jesus says, Love your God and love your neighbor. But in Luke, the man asks, And who is my neighbor? Maybe he thinks, I need to narrow this down. I can't love just any neighbor. Some of my neighbors don't believe what I believe; some of them don't obey the Sabbath laws; some are a different status than I am. There are some people I just don't care to love. So Jesus says, All right, let's define neighbor.

And Jesus tells the story of a man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, and was robbed along the way. A priest and a Levite, two good, upstanding Jewish religious workers, pass by on the other side, because they are afraid he might be dead and if they touch him, they won't be able to perform their temple duties. Sounds like they were concerned that they love God, but couldn't figure out how to love their neighbor.

And then a Samaritan man comes by, someone his Jewish listeners hated, and *he* helps the suffering neighbor. Jesus finishes by saying, Your neighbor is *anyone* in need. Love your neighbor.

But then Luke tells a story about what it looks like to love God. He tells about Jesus visiting the house of his good friends Mary and Martha. It probably was a surprise visit. Jesus forgot to email them that he was coming. So in walk Jesus and twelve hungry followers, and you know the story, Martha scrambles to put a meal together.

And her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him tell stories. Martha gets frustrated, and storms into the living room, and says, Jesus, tell my sister to help. And remember what Jesus says: Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by so many things. Only one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.

What does Jesus mean by saying, Only one thing is needful? Maybe it means, Martha, only one dish is necessary. You are working so hard here and what I need is a simple meal and time with you. Or maybe it means, Martha, I only am necessary; come and sit at my feet. Either way, Jesus is saying, I want to spend time with you! I'm on my way to the cross, and this may be my last visit with you. I don't need a fancy meal. I need a relationship with you. Come and love me by sitting with me!

Martha is not a bad person here. A meal needed to be prepared. But Mary is more on target because she is loving Jesus. She is sitting at his feet. What does it look like to love your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Sit at Jesus' feet. Listen to the voice of God.

In the first story, the right thing to do was to help your neighbor, the man on the side of the road. In the second story, the right thing was to sit and love Jesus. It's both-and. Both are needed.

What does Jesus mean when he says, A second is like it? Maybe it means, the second commandment flows out of the first. Loving God gives us the energy to love our neighbor. And people know we love God because we love our neighbor. The two really are connected.

The Letter of James shows this connection. James says, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.'"

I believe it is similar to ask the question: If you love God but don't love your neighbor, what good is that? How can you say you love God and not love your neighbor? Loving God fuels our love for our neighbor, and loving our neighbor shows the world that we love God. A friend of mine says that

loving God is like breathing in, and loving your neighbor is like breathing out. We need to do both, and the oxygen we take in in our relationship with God fuels us for action for our neighbor.

I think it's instructive what Jesus says here. He doesn't say, Love the *whole world* as you love yourself! Maybe he doesn't say that because it's too easy to say that we love something as vague as the whole world. It's much more difficult to love individuals. Karl Marx, the founder of communism, loved the "working class," this whole group of people, but apparently he couldn't stand individual workers. The working class sounds noble and inspiring. But when he met an individual worker, maybe he just saw the things he didn't like about him.

It reminds me of the Peanuts cartoon where Lucy says to Linus, "You, a doctor! Hah, that's a big laugh. You could never be a doctor. You know why? Because you don't love mankind, that's why." And Linus yells back, "I love mankind. It's people I can't stand!"

Jesus doesn't say, Love the whole world! He says, Love the individual in front of you. Love the neighbor you come across on this particular day. Love the neighbor with this particular personality.

I also love that Jesus doesn't say something hopelessly romantic like, Love your neighbor *even more* than you love yourself. Wow, how difficult would that be? No, he says, Love your neighbor in the same way that you love yourself. I think of the Golden Rule here. Treats others as you wish to be treated. Love others in the way you would like to be loved. Take care of others in the way you take care of yourself. If you appreciate your health care, then work so that others can get quality health care too. If you appreciate good education for your kids, then work so that all kids can get good quality education.

When we heard this verse from the Old Testament earlier about loving your neighbor, I wanted you to hear the verses around it so you could see what loving your neighbor looked like in Israel.

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God."

Apparently one of the ways to love your neighbor was to share your harvest

with the needy. We do that, don't we? We love our neighbor through Backpack Buddies and Start Right and sharing our garden produce with those who need it. Thank you for that.

“You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.” We are not supposed to gain anything unethically from our neighbor. We are to treat our workers fairly. We are to make sure those with physical challenges are taken care of.

“You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.” What does it mean to judge your neighbor with justice? Give them the equal rights that you have.

“You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” Even reproving your neighbor is a way to love your neighbor. Sometimes we need to say a challenging word to someone. Jesus says elsewhere (Matthew 18), Go to your neighbor who has offended you and work to reconcile the relationship. That's a way to love your neighbor.

Sometimes loving your neighbor means to give them the legal rights they need. In the 60s, the greatest way to love an African-American neighbor was to make sure that African Americans could vote and that they couldn't be legally discriminated against in education and work and housing. Loving your neighbor meant Civil Rights legislation.

Susan and I have always enjoyed something like 1400 legal benefits of marriage because of that piece of paper making our marriage legal. So before we had marriage equality in this country, for me to love my neighbor as I love myself meant to support the right of my LGBT friends to have those benefits as well. Loving your neighbor as you love yourself means working for those things you have that you would like your neighbor to have as well.

Here's another thing about loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. It takes me beyond just loving myself. It takes me beyond what *I* get out of any encounter to: what does my neighbor receive? It helps me act to benefit my neighbor who will come long after me. One way to love my neighbor who will arrive generations from now is to take care of this planet in the present.

I wonder if loving our neighbor also means getting to know our neighbor who is different from us. There is a story in the Vedas, the sacred text of the Hindus, about a man who enters a darkened room. To his horror he sees what looks like a snake coiled up in the corner. He is filled with terror at the prospect of a venomous snake ready to strike, but he fights the urge to flee and instead moves towards the snake to examine it.

Upon closer look he discovers that the would-be threat is nothing more than a harmless coil of rope. I wonder if we don't look at our neighbor as a threat sometimes: the immigrant, the person of another religion, the neighbor who votes differently than we do. What if instead of moving away, we moved closer to discover more about them? What if we got into conversation with them? What if we heard their story? What if we discovered why they believe what they believe? Couldn't that be part of loving our neighbor? What if instead of being threatened, we became curious?

I want to close with a story about the power of loving your neighbor. I found this story on a blog by Frank Fredericks, and I am using his words. “One day, Brendan, a young but rising DJ in New York, was coming home to his Brooklyn apartment when a homeless woman asked him for money. He said, honestly, that he had no money. By the end of the week, she asked two more times, and each no he answered “no.” Finally she frankly replied, “you better not, because every day you say no.” Inserting some rational thinking into an otherwise awkward conversation, he proposed, “I am on my way to a job interview. If I get the job, I will take you out for Chinese food.” This promise yielded a friendship that neither was prepared for — that changed the trajectory of their lives, both forwards toward each other.

“Brendan got the job. But their friendship didn't just end with Chinese food. They built a friendship of mutual support, spending their birthdays, holidays and tough times together, over a period of eight years. When Brendan's heater broke, she made him a blanket. Two days later when he told her that he had lost his job, she disappeared, returning minutes later, bringing him

groceries, and which continued to do throughout the winter. Even with so little, she never hesitated to give back.

“Over these years, Jackie moved from the streets and subway stations, into a halfway house, YMCA, and is now moving into an apartment. To celebrate this occasion, Brendan wanted to do something special for Jackie. He went with her to Target, and helped her to pick out everything she’d need for an apartment, starting a registry. Then, he set up a campaign to raise the money to pay for the registry (now closed), along with an awesome video telling their story. While their original goal was to raise \$500, the campaign went viral and they’ve raised more than \$6,000, and are now looking to use the extra funding to support other women in need.”

Brendan does not claim to be a follower of Jesus, but he is certainly acting like one. He is loving his neighbor by getting to know his neighbor. And notice that a mutual relationship blossomed. When we love our neighbor as ourselves, *we* are going to be transformed. And why do we love our neighbor? Because God first loved us. And God says, Here’s a way to respond to my awesome love. Amen.