

Sermon for Oct 16, 2016 – “How to Love”

29th Sunday in OT, year C – Text: Galatians 5:1, 13-14; Mark 12:28-34

There’s a story about the fourth evangelist, St. John; the only one of the twelve disciples said to have lived into old age. In his later years, John’s ability to express himself became increasingly limited until finally he could say only a few words. Actually, a single phrase which he’d repeat over and over again. On the Lord’s Day, he’d be carried into the midst of the congregation and all would fall silent. They would strain to hear the words of a man who actually sat at Jesus’ feet and heard him speak. The words of the disciple whom Jesus loved. John would then open his mouth and say: “**My children, love one another. My children, love one another**” over and over again. “**My children, love one another.**”

It’s hard coming up with something new about these commandments. The commandments that summarize all of the Law and the Prophets. The commandments to love God and neighbor. Let me start by asking this question. How can love ever be commanded? How can it be a duty? If it’s a duty, doesn’t this detract from its worth? Isn’t love something that happens spontaneously when we’re confronted with someone, or something, that’s immensely good and attractive? It almost seems that the commandment to love is a command to do the impossible. In other words, the commandment, however noble, seems to imply that we can have control of our inner emotions, that it’s something for which we can grit our teeth, stiffen our upper lip, and just do. The challenge seems greater when it comes to loving enemies, and immensely greater with God, whom we cannot see. One might surmise from Jesus’ admonition that somehow we can by an act of will just start loving God, a God of whom even the best of us have only the slightest knowledge and little first-hand experience. Of course, grace is supposed to help us overcome stubborn feelings. But what if we just don’t seem to have the grace? What I’d like to do, is offer what I hope is a new way of looking at, thinking about, and living out, these commandments. Taking a look at what they require and pray that each day, we may come to a deeper realization, and a deeper **actualization**, of what they involve.

The first one is about loving God. How do you love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Why are all **four** things mentioned? Some would say it’s for emphasis, to show how **deeply** we must love. And, I’d say that there’s a lot of truth to this. Still, the four words all point to different things...different parts, or aspects, of ourselves. Parts that we often separate and **compartmentalize** in our daily living even though we shouldn’t. The problem is the daily grind can wear us down. It can sap our strength and our wills. It can put stress on us and foster the divisions inside us, divisions between heart, mind, and soul. Sometimes it seems easier to love abstractly than concretely. God knows this about us and He’s forgiving, even when our love doesn’t quite measure up. Still, God calls us to love him totally and out of that love to love our neighbors as ourselves. The two commandments, then, are bound into one. A **total** love of God, and a **total** love of neighbor. So that one becomes, in a sense, the measure of the other. Jesus says that we should love God with everything we have, that our love needs to go beyond simple expressions of agreement, that it should be seen in every part of our lives. We’re to love God and our neighbors without exception, exclusion, division or differentiation. In other words, there should be **no** difference between how we love God and how we love ourselves and our neighbors.

It's worthy of note that Jesus added an extra dimension to the commandment given in Deuteronomy 6:5, which, itself is built on the foundation of the great prayer of Judaism, the Shema. There it reads: **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."** Here, in Mark's gospel, as well as in Luke, Jesus adds the phrase "with all your mind." This points to the understanding, back then, that the mind rather than the heart defined personal being. It underscores the central point: Every fiber of our being should enter into our devotion to God!

Also, the sequence seems important. **Heart** first. Faith begins in awe. **"When mind and soul agree,"** one theologian wrote, **"belief is born..."** **"But first our hearts must know the shudder of adoration."** Faith isn't the end of a step-by-step process, nor is it an acceptance of some logical proposition. Instead, faith is as one writer put it. **"a blush in the presence of God."** As Blaise Pascal recognized: **"The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing..."** **"We feel it in many things. "It is the heart, not reason, which experiences God. "This then is faith..."** **"God perceived by the heart and not by reason."** "With all your heart" reminds us that "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." And, we **can** control where we put our priorities. We can choose what we "treasure." We can make efforts to move our focus from distractions that interfere with our service of God. Even in prayer or meditation, the effort to avoid distractions and wandering imagination is itself a loving act.

Next, **soul**, which must have intimate connection with the heart in this exhortation. In Hebrew, thinking the heart had to do with the mind and will whereas the soul corresponded to the self, or one's life force. But God's love asks for **complete** self-giving. It calls from the depths of our very being asking us to turn all that we are over to God. "With all your soul" says that it's quite possible to carry out tasks mechanically, half-heartedly, lacking full commitment. It says that we have control over whether our "soul" is invested in what we are doing.

Third, is **mind**, which puts into a Greek idiom what **heart** communicated in Hebrew. In modern Western terms, we often think in terms of left and right brain functions as we interpret them, with the point being, that both the rational **and** the emotional should play a role in our act of loving God. True, the heart makes the crucial decision as to whether you'll live your life in relationship with God, but once you've taken that leap of (or into) faith, however, your mind will set to work and do everything possible to unravel the mystery of faith. "With all your mind," tells us that we can, by an act of will, work to increase our knowledge of God. In the Scriptures, in creation – that is, nature, but most especially in living things, in particular, by recognizing the goodness of fellow human beings. Developing the ability to discern the image of God in others, and in some exceptionally difficult cases, looking deeper into someone for redeeming qualities or untapped potential.

Strength reminds us that the physical mustn't be omitted from our devotion. Interestingly, Hebrew psychology didn't compartmentalize personhood. Likewise, Christians understand the integral nature of both physical and spiritual health and we've cultivated ways to praise God in both. "With all your strength" is telling us that just as our response to God's love should entail our whole person, so too should it entail love of persons and things God has made. So integral is love of neighbor to love of God that the apostle Paul could declare, as we read earlier: **"The whole law is summed up in a single commandment: you shall love your neighbor as yourself."** Which begs the question: how could Paul gloss over the first and greatest commandment? Only by recognizing that the first one is fully implicit in the second one.

As a rabbi once said, “**True love of man is clandestine love of God.**” So, “love your neighbor as yourself” wasn’t new. It was a part of Torah as found in the Book of Leviticus. Jesus stretched it by clarifying just who our “neighbor” actually was and doing so in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We talked about that parable a few months back, and if it teaches us anything it’s that in God’s economy, compassion trumps (no pun intended) religious and political correctness. Radical for it’s time, Jesus headed a compassion movement. One that often locked horns with the holiness movement led by Israel’s religious elite. Perhaps it’s time to revive it. Because, then as now the need to emphasize the love of God and neighbor has never been greater. We Christians, have two testaments. A newer one that speaks of God’s love, God’s kingdom and eternal life, and an older one that offers us greater perspective, helping us make sense of the new one. Doing so by telling us who God is in the first place. The older one contains God’s Law and shows us how to **apply** it while the new one shows us how to **live** it. It does so by introducing us to One who’s both the perfect fulfillment of that law and a perfect example of how to live it – Jesus Christ. Together, they’re the sum of the message that we need to hear and understand. If our world is to have anything resembling hope, together they form the standard. They remind us that there are things like duty and responsibility, justice, accountability and punishment, prayer and power, peace and reconciliation. They confront us with questions, questions that we ought to ask ourselves. Why? Because they keep us honest as we work out how to love God and one another as we should. It’s part of the self-confrontation that leads to genuine spiritual growth and maturity which, in turn, helps us to love more and better.

I’ll admit, though, that as I’ve grown older Jesus’ commandment to love doesn’t bring me as much comfort. In fact, sometimes it makes me decidedly uncomfortable. It’s one thing to know that God loves us unconditionally, it’s quite another to realize that in the final judgment our ability to love others is the ultimate barometer of how we love Jesus. Think about that. Jesus doesn’t seem to care whether our theology is sufficiently up to snuff or whether we even attend church regularly. No, what Jesus really seems to care about is whether we’ve seen God’s image in the least of our brothers and sisters and loved them as such. When we see folks who are less well off than we are, if in fact, we see them at all, what is it that we see? Do we see Christ? Or do we see something **less**? And in so doing, **become** something less?

But Jesus’ radical call to love doesn’t end there. Jesus calls us to love and see the divine image even in our enemies. In terms of worldly logic, does this makes any sense? Doesn’t it just seem foolish to try to love your enemies, those who may hate you or even want to kill you? Of course it does! But, in terms of the soul, Jesus’ command to love is the only thing that truly does make sense. It really is all or nothing. Paul can say that in the divine wrap up, “God will be all in all.” Why? Because God **is** all in all. And here’s the thing: If we cannot see God in **all** things, we fail to perceive God. We may see beauty, power, and majesty, but it won’t be God. And if God is in our enemies, those, like us, made in God’s image, how can we **not** love them?

See, the Pharisees knew all the words of Scripture, but not their deeper meaning. They knew that we’re called to love God with all our heart, soul, and might but they failed to recognize that one cannot love God if one does not love their neighbor. Maybe the Pharisees can be excused but we can’t. We know we have no excuse for acting like we don’t know any better, because quite frankly we do! So, will we indeed love? Or will we stubbornly cling to our fears, our anxieties, our doubts and our petty grievances?

Ultimately, whether or not it makes sense to love our neighbors and our enemies, isn't the point, but what we must realize is that without this love our love is incomplete and our lives make no sense. They only make sense in God – the God who is love itself.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.