



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 23
Proper 26 (B)

Love Is Not Easy, but It Is Necessary
[RCL] Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

There are times in life when directions are given that seem very simple. For instance, if you are driving a car, in almost every state in the union, you are required to put on your directional signal to indicate that you are turning a corner. If you want to interrupt a conversation, you should say, “Excuse me.” You tell your kids to put away their toys when they are finished playing. That way they will know where they are the next time they want them. These instructions seem very easy to follow and yet they are constantly violated.

The commandments by which early members of the Jewish community lived were directions from God handed down to Moses about how to live in the world and in community. Jewish leaders added hundreds of more rules that stated the beliefs of the followers of God.

When Jesus was asked by members of his contemporary community, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus redirects part of his answer to the words contained in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He says, “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.” And then Jesus adds the second instruction: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That was a very straightforward and familiar statement.

Presumably, this was a part of the daily practice of those who were listening to Jesus. Many members of the Jewish community prayed a daily prayer called the Shema, which incorporates the first statement that Jesus quoted to them. That tradition continues to this day.

Like the first illustrative directions offered at the beginning of this text, the commandment that Jesus gives to the scribe seems pretty simple. He tells him that the most important rule is that they must love God above all things and with every fiber of their beings. While the scribes and the Sadducees may have been somewhat skeptical about the true identity of Jesus, they had been formed by God’s teachings and requirements for a holy life. Still, they were still struggling with these ideals.

As contemporary faith followers, the struggle to live fully into these commandments is apparent throughout our society. If loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind were easy, there would be no

room for doubt when difficulties would arise. Yet, there are times for many when doubts arise – especially when prayers are not answered as quickly as one would want or in the way one would hope. When loved ones die unexpectedly, many will express a crisis of faith. “If there is a God,” people will say, “why did God allow this to happen to me?” Why did God allow me to lose my job? Why did God allow my marriage to fall apart? Why is my best friend addicted to drugs? It is not uncommon for regular churchgoers to question the existence of God at very challenging points in life. There have been many books written about this subject. Some of you may have read *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold S. Kushner.

Trust is a main source of love. Jesus reminds us that when God is fully trusted, there cannot be any room for second-guessing. When there seems to be no explanation for occurrences in life, those are the moments to let your faith sustain you and lean on God for support and strength, instead of turning away from God.

There is more to this assignment than loving God with all your being. Jesus takes it a step further and says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In the Gospel of Mark, the scribe agrees with Jesus and understands the requirements. But take a look at the discussion Jesus had with the Pharisees in the account from Luke about the greatest commandment. When Jesus says to them, “Love your neighbor,” they immediately push back by asking, “Who is my neighbor?” This is where things seem to get a little tricky. Jesus demonstrates the answer with the parable of the Good Samaritan. He tells the story of the man who was robbed, injured, and left in the road for dead. A priest saw the incapacitated man and walked right past him. A Levite encountered him and actually crossed the street away from him. It was the Samaritan, the unlikeliest person of all, who stopped, offered aid, and even got him to a place where someone could care for him. Jesus’ admonition to the Pharisees was that love for your neighbor is wrapped tightly in care, compassion, and mercy.

The Covid pandemic has created great tension in the United States. It has literally pitted geographical neighbor against neighbor and relatives against each other. There are thousands of news accounts of people fighting in restaurants and in other public spaces and even on airplanes over mask-wearing and vaccinations. What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself? What would Jesus say at this moment? Perhaps being less judgmental about us versus them is a place to begin. Instead of physical altercations, what would it look like to embrace your neighbor so that a dialogue could commence instead of accusation? If we follow the lesson of the Good Samaritan, how are we caring for our ill neighbors and where are we being led to help one another? Christians are called to do all that we can to love everyone, not just those who agree with us. Love means striving for unity and moving towards becoming Beloved Community.

The same holds true for many of the controversies of the world today. Think of the great conversational shift that could occur if love took the lead. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has written a wonderful book called *Love Is the Way*. Bishop Curry has said consistently, “If it’s not about love, then it’s not about God.” There is no compromise on this commandment. You cannot love God and hate your neighbor.

When we love God completely, we are bound to find ways to answer the call to love our neighbors also. We will be accepting of people who look different from us and those whose lifestyles are not the same. Resistance to courageous conversations that could lead to greater understanding of differing opinions prevents us from loving each other in the ways God describes.

More importantly, there is liberation in a willingness to trust God enough to believe that neighbors are the same as we are. They have the same dreams and desires to love the Lord and to follow God as faithful disciples. They, too, have picked up their crosses and have made the commitment to follow Jesus. What greater love is there? The Good News from Jesus is that this kind of love is achievable. It is possible to love others so much that polarization ends, and healing begins.

Undoubtedly, the directions given by Jesus are not so easy after all. Loving God and each other is worth it, people of God. The next time you are asked, “Who is my neighbor?” feel free to use a quote that has been turned into an Episcopal meme:

Love Thy Neighbor

Thy homeless neighbor

Thy Muslim neighbor

Thy Black neighbor

Thy gay neighbor

Thy immigrant neighbor

Thy Jewish neighbor

Thy Christian neighbor

Thy atheist neighbor

Thy disabled neighbor

Thy addicted neighbor

Amen.

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