

The Gospel reading for today begins with the Teacher providing an answer to a common topic of discussion among the early rabbis, namely, what is the *most* important commandment in the law. In the specific instance in Matthew, Jesus is responding to tests by several groups trying to expose him as a fraud.

Jesus' response begins with a quotation from *Shema Yisrael*, a portion of the Deuteronomic law which was part of the daily prayer practice of his people. Although it was familiar, that does not mean it is self-explanatory.

What does it mean to love God? Jesus does not, in this passage, expound on the principle, so I hope you will allow me to make recourse to 1 John 4:16 to assert that "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them."

If we live in God when we live in love, then we can perhaps begin to make sense of the statement of Jesus in the Gospel of John that life eternal is to know God and his Son Jesus Christ, whom he has sent,¹ and that what Jesus has asked of us is to love one another.² In other words, if we are to love God, we must come to know him; and to know God, we must abide in his love; to abide in his love, we must love one another.

Thus, the second commandment, that we love our neighbor as ourselves, is part and parcel of the first, that we love God. The one is dependent on the other.

I want to pause here to note that there are actually *two* beloveds in the second commandment: neighbor *and* self. The love of self is often skipped over in discussions of love, which I find to be a tragic mistake. Indeed, we cannot make sense of the command to love our neighbor until we have a proper understanding of what it means to love ourselves.

God desires us to have joy, and to seek our own good, and we are made to do so. Jesuit theologian Edward C. Vacek states the point well: "God loves us. . . . The God we know and proclaim is a God who loves us through the activity of creation, redemption, and sanctification. . . . This God passionately wants our own good."³

So we see that we must love ourselves – not the least because God loves us, and we love what he loves, but also because we are made for love, and for joy.

Once we have learned how to love ourselves, we then must show that very same love for others. This flow of love between God, self, and neighbor is the core of Christianity. As the great theologian Howard Thurman summarizes in his masterwork *Jesus and the Disinherited*,

The religion of Jesus makes the love-ethic central. This is no ordinary achievement. It seems clear that Jesus started out with the simple teaching concerning love embodied in the timeless words of Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might," and "thy neighbor as

¹ John 17:3

² John 13:34

³ (Vacek, 258-59)

thymself." . . . Every man is potentially every other man's neighbor. Neighborliness is nonspatial; it is qualitative. A man must love his neighbor directly, clearly, permitting no barriers between.⁴

How can we love, then, God, self, and neighbor? Given the wisdom and experience here, I feel like I am one of the least prepared among us to provide any wisdom on the subject, but I hope you will permit me to share some reflections.

It seems to me that love – whether for God, neighbor, or self – requires at least two things: attention and justice.

First, attention. To love God means to know God, and to pay attention to God's work in the world. As Philosopher Simone Weil explained, "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer. If we turn our mind toward the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself."⁵

Prayer, then, is the act of paying attention – a fact noted more than once from this "pulpit" through the work of poet Mary Oliver. Let me share again her poem, "Praying," to state this point better than I could:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

I tried to follow this advice when writing this sermon by taking some time by the ocean. As I was thinking about what I might say, I took about twenty minutes simply observing the way that the surf and the shore meet and part, meet and part, ceaselessly moving.

I had to make a conscious commitment to do make these observations – I drove out to the shore, found a place to sit alone, and made sure I had nothing that needed doing in the meantime. It felt, in part, selfish to take such time! But it was also part of learning to love God and myself. And so I tried to hear the divine voice in the process of the waves rolling, rolling, rolling on the shore – then expressing gratitude to God.

I have a special connection to the magic and power of the ocean, but it could be anything that you observe. Learning to pay attention has been a gift from many preachers at this pulpit. I have tried to

⁴ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Abignon-Cokesbury Press, Nashville, p. 89.

⁵ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*.

learn to develop that attention as a prayer practice, and I believe it has brought me closer to God, the source of all I can see. It has led me, at least, to love God a little more.

Second, justice. Love begins by learning to will the good of the other. For example, to be kind in our personal relations, the same way God would want us, God's beloved, to be treated kindly.

Knowing how to love can be difficult. We may fear being taken advantage of, or fear that we will not have the wherewithal to act in love. We must build our capacity for love through deliberate, consistent attempts to cultivate it as an art. We do what we can, in the limited ways we can, for the sake of the other. In this, we seek to emulate the Apostle Paul, as he wrote in today's Epistle: "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."⁶

To follow Jesus, then, involves personal expressions of love, but it does not stop there. To love our neighbor also means seeking justice on a systemic, societal level. To be committed to the way of Jesus is to accept an insatiable commitment to justice.

What is justice? On this subject, Dr. Cornel West wrote, "When you love people, you hate the fact that they're being treated unjustly. Justice is not simply an abstract concept to regulate institutions, but also a fire in the bones to promote the well-being of all."⁷

Or, as Dr. West has put it more succinctly, justice is what love looks like in public.

What can we do for justice? For myself, I have learned in the last year that there is more, perhaps, than I might have been led to believe.

There are small things we can do on our own. For one thing, we gather together here. Our meetings together strengthen us, provide each other with ideas of how to better live out our commitment to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We provide each other the personal and emotional support we need to keep carrying the yoke of discipleship, and to have joy in it. We share ideas of how to do good. I, for example, have learned so much from the many lives of faith and goodness, of struggle, attempt, and determination that you have been willing to provide glimpses of. Each of us strengthens the other, and we all are more prepared to pursue justice and enjoy the love of God thereby.

Beyond these (for now metaphorical) four walls, we can and do individually and corporately take an interest in the community around us. We can donate our time or our money to direct ministries like Loaves and Fishes, or by participating in community organizations and mutual aid. I have recently begun volunteering with an organization called the Semilla Collective here in New Haven, which helps distribute food to families. Many of us have provided help to various organizations and groups in our own town from working with volunteers at IRIS to reading programs to other congregations to city government.

We cannot do everything, and we shouldn't feel like we ought to. But we can, and do, do many things. This is the joy of the yoke of discipleship.

⁶ 1 Thess. 2:1-8

⁷ Cornel West, *Living and Loving Out Loud, a Memoir* (2009)

But our responsibility to love does not end with our personal connections or our own neighborhoods. In a society such as ours – a government, at least in theory, of the people, by the people, and for the people – the suffering of anyone in our land is our suffering, and the success of any is our success.

This summer, for example, we saw a massive wave of political action on behalf of Black Americans, who suffer, and suffer disproportionately, from the ills of our violent society. If we are seeking to fulfill the great commandments in the law, we should not let that memory fade, and we should do whatever we can, given our time, talents, and opportunities, to further the cause of love.

We cannot allow our public leaders to forget our demands. We should vote for justice, yes, but that is only the beginning. We must continue to insist, publicly and privately, that justice be done for our brothers and sisters. We must participate in public demonstrations of our demands. We must follow up with those we must seek what to stir up “good trouble,” in the words of John Lewis.

Again, justice is what love looks like in public.

Of course, it can be exhausting to work for justice. Any work worth doing usually is. There is so much opposition to justice in this world, in our own selves and in others. We may find that, seeking to fulfill the great commandment, we will work hard at loving through seeking justice, only to find that our efforts do not bear fruit in our time.

We should not despair – ever has it been thus. The example of the cross shows us that, in God’s eyes, what looks like failure and folly may actually be the road to victory. As Dr. West has written elsewhere, “To be a Christian is to live dangerously, honestly, freely - to step in the name of love as if you may land on nothing, yet to keep on stepping because the something that sustains you no empire can give you and no empire can take away.”⁸

Nonetheless, it can be hard to plant trees we will never see bear fruit. In the Old Testament reading for today, Moses, after wandering in the wilderness for forty years, is informed that he will not be given the honor or leading his people into the promised land. He is taken, instead, to a mountaintop, where he can console himself by seeing what a glorious gift the Lord will eventually give to his people.

We may find ourselves in Moses’ shoes, on the mountaintop. The passage reminds me of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who also noted, on the eve of his own death, that he too had been to the mountaintop. “We’ve got some difficult days ahead,” he said. “But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. . . . And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.”⁹

He was right; the years have been difficult. The people have not entered the promised land. I want to count myself As a nation, and as individuals, we hold ourselves back by our unwillingness to sacrifice – to make sacred by setting them aside – the old ways of doing things. Nevertheless, may we, as one

⁸ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (ed. Penguin, 2005) - ISBN: 9781101655863

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” accessed 10/24/20 at <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>

people undivided in love, work for those changes, large and small, necessary to bring justice to one and all. May we get to the promised land, and there rejoice together in love.

Getting to the promised land, together, is what Jesus was trying to teach us with the great commandments in the law. And although the path may be unclear, what we can be sure of is that, as we seek to love God and neighbor, we will find joy. We may also find difficulty, but that should be no surprise, given the life and death and resurrection of the one we follow. Nevertheless, we can all press on in joy and gladness, knowing that as we do, we will abide in God's love – in life eternal, in life abundant.