

Loving Our Neighbors

Leviticus 19:18, Mark 12:28-31

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God spoke to Moses saying, "Don't seek revenge or carry a grudge against any of your people. Love your neighbor as yourself. I am God." *Leviticus 19:18 The Message*

One of the religion scholars came up. Hearing the lively exchanges of question and answer and seeing how sharp Jesus was in his answers, he put in his question: "Which is most important of all the commandments?" Jesus said, "The first in importance is, 'Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.' And here is the second: 'Love others, your neighbors, as well as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment that ranks with these." *Mark 12:28-31 The Message*

The scribe asked Jesus a basic question - What is the summary of our religion? Which of the 613 commandments is the greatest of all? What comes first?

Jesus says, "Love God." Love the Holy One with everything you are and all that you have. And without so much as taking a breath, he tags on a second commandment, from Leviticus 19, "You shall love the neighbor as much as you love yourself." It is a stunning answer and cannot be argued against.

Those who teach the faith will divide the Ten Commandments this way. The first four commandments are about loving God: no other gods, no attempts to capture God in an image, no misuse of God's name, remember your creation and liberation from slavery by saving a complete day, the Sabbath, for God every week.

The remaining six commandments constitute loving the neighbor. Honor your parents, for they are your closest neighbors. Don't take your neighbor's life, don't take your neighbor's spouse, don't take your neighbor's stuff. Don't lie or distort the truth about your neighbor. Don't desire anything your neighbor possesses.

There it is: love God, love your neighbor. God looks upon the heart, the soul, the mind, the strength. What God is looking for is evidence of love: love returned back to God, who is the source of love, the essence of love; and love extended to the neighbor.

In Mark 12, a few verses after this morning's passage when the scribe tried explain how much he loved God and all the things he did to prove it, Jesus said, "You're almost there, right on the border of God's kingdom." Or another translation "*You are **not far** from the kin-dom of God.*"

Apparently it's possible to quote the Bible, then get it wrong. You can agree in your mind, "Love God, love neighbor," without actually loving anybody. This unnamed scribe can recognize the truth of the greatest commandments, but is he going to live those commandments and be drawn closer to God and experience God's reign, kin-dom in his life?

Later on in Mark we discover the scribes are in the inner sanctum of religious professionals when Jesus is arrested and condemned (15:1). The scribes are in the group that hand over Jesus to Pontius Pilate. The scribes stand among those who make fun of the Christ when he is on the cross (15:31). It's one thing to know God teaches us to love; it's another thing to love.

The distance between is "not far."

Loving God may sound difficult because, at least on the surface, nobody can see God. When we love God, when we experience a deep love, a sense of being at home, a holy presence, we are pretty close to the kin-dom. We can't see God, but we can be open to love and be loved and in the presence of abiding love.

But loving one another and loving our neighbor, whom we can see, you would think that's much easier. Here they are, right in front of us, available for us to love. That's easy, right? It's not easy at all. People have struggles, blind spots, trauma, opinions, bias, and differences. That is one challenge of loving our neighbors.

It is also a question of what loving our neighbor looks like in daily life. One way we love our neighbors is to find out what is needed and then be willing to do it. PDA (Presbyterian Disaster Assistance) is part of our denomination that is an expression of loving our neighbors in the midst of long term recovery from disasters. Loving and caring and helping after the first and second waves of help is over. Some of us are going this week to hammer nails and move debris and put up dry wall and listen to stories of people in Paradise, CA who survived the horrific 2018 Camp Fire. And some of you donated money so our team could go. Together we are loving our neighbors. When we are loving our neighbors, we are pretty close to the kin-dom, the reign of God.

At the session meeting this week we read and discussed a list from a pastor in Portland of possible reasons someone would join a church. One of them was:

Joining a church is a way of practicing - among a small group of people over a significant period of time - what you'd like the world to be like. (1)

Yes, one reason to join and be part of a church is to practice what we would like the world to be like. I would like the world to be a place where neighbors help and love their neighbors. I would like to live in a world where compassion is more powerful than greed, serving is seen as

a source joy, a vision of the Beloved Community motivates people's actions, justice and peace for all people are priorities. All this takes practice.

I think this is one reason to be part of and support the church. The church teaches us to love God and love one another. And not merely to teach this as a concept or an idea – but as a live-giving, life-saving practice. If we don't have Someone or Something greater than ourselves to give ourselves to, life grows cold, love grows stingy. We fall into isolation, without purpose, never tasting joy, cut off from the very gifts that God provides for our well-being.

As one of my colleagues put it - Spirituality is falling in love. Week after week, day after day, that is exactly our church's invitation to you and to me: to give our hearts to God and one another. As we give our hearts, everything else follows – time, treasures, talents, all.

So hear again the central invitation of the faith we share: You shall love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

And for all who love, you're not far from the kin-dom. In fact, you're really close. Amen.

1) "Why Join A Church?" By Sharad Yadav, Lead Pastor, Bread and Wine Community, Portland, Oregon. Posted on Facebook 10/7/21

Parts of this sermon were adapted from a sermon by Rev. William G. Carter, "How Far is 'Not Far'? November 3, 2018

<https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/search?q=love+your+neighbor>