

“Greatest Command”
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46
October 23, 2011

Reading the scriptures appointed for today I thought that it should be relatively easy to come up with a sermon for this Sunday. After all we have good material to work with. What is the greatest commandment? That was the simple question that was asked of Jesus. Love the Lord your God completely ... Love your neighbor as yourself! Who could struggle with material like that? The only thing is that we know it so well We have heard it a thousand time We could all recite the answer by heart Love God - Love your neighbor as yourself. We have got that one down pat.

So I wondered why it would be such a struggle to come up with a sermon? I wondered if I was having a problem with the sermon because even though we know the answer just as well as the Pharisee's did we also know that the question was a trap. As with last weeks Gospel we are reminded that Jesus was not very popular with the religious leaders of the day and they were trying to silence Him. What we know is that Jesus answered so well that the religious leaders gave up after this question and the next day began to make plans to bring Jesus and His 15 minutes of fame to an end another way - violently, with a betrayal, trial and crucifixion. They would root Him out and get rid of Him. Somehow it seems that the beauty of the call to love God and your neighbor gets a bit lost in the midst of the reality of what was happening.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It is good stuff. We can nod and smile in agreement. We can recite it to one another as though we have got this one down. We might even turn to something like our first scripture reading for today to help us talk about what it means to love our neighbor. I.e.. No unjust judgements ... No partiality ... No slander or bearing a grudge or taking vengeance. Of course, reprove / tell him when he is wrong, work to correct problems but love your neighbor as yourself. It is good stuff ... We can buy that It is what we believe ... It is what we do as Christians. Am I right? Can I have an “AMEN, Brother? Well, at least it sounds right and I wouldn't want to argue with Jesus or the Old Testament “Holiness Code” but But somewhere in the midst all of this nice ‘Love God and neighbor’ stuff it all gets a bit hard when it is held up against the reality of the world.

Ah, the real world I tried to find a video to add to the sermon. There were some great u-tube videos that I could have used under the heading of “love your neighbor”. They ranged from a pastor talking about just knowing our neighbors as he reflected on a home that had been sold at auction because the state thought it was vacant only to find the owner still sitting in his chair holding the newspaper he had been reading four years ago when he had died and nobody noticed to another video that had a man throwing donuts into passing cars on the 405 freeway in Los Angeles as a way of loving his neighbors. Or there was the tear-jerker that I almost showed about the woman who was lonely and befriended that you girl that was being picked on by friends ... Again a call to love your neighbor. We could talk about the North Dakota flood fight and how we have experienced the call to love our neighbors. The list could go on and on as we think about what Jesus and the scriptures must mean as they call us to love God and neighbor. And the real world makes it more and more difficult to really understand.

Love God ... Love your neighbor. It all sounds great until you have to hold it up against the real stuff of life. And that is where I found it so hard to know where to go with the sermon

today. And frankly, all of this gets even more difficult because I don't know how you will feel about my reflections ... But here we go.

We came to yet another dark day of celebration in our world this past week. We are getting used to seeing these days as dictators, tyrants, terrorists are brought to a violent end. Incredible things are happening in our world. It is remarkable that in such a short time we have been at this place with Moammar Gadhafi, Osama bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein - each powerful leaders - each loved by their immediate followers and at the same time feared and hated by so many. We know that the tyranny has to be stopped. It is easy to justify any and all actions that are taken to bring the suffering and tyranny to an end. When that goal is accomplished, it is easy to understand why people would celebrate. But as I considered the simple words that are at the heart of our texts for today - the words that are the greatest command that God has given to His people, I found myself struggling with what it all really means for us in these days to love God and neighbor.

I found myself holding up the story of Jesus next to the story of these modern day leaders. Of course one has to note that Jesus was a simple religious teacher a radical difference from being a cruel dictator or a terrorist mastermind. And maybe that is part of the point. All were loved and followed by some and hated by others. Eventually a confrontation became inevitable. All would meet a violent end as we disposed of that which we judged to be undesirable.

Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, in private homes, beside the local lakes and in the city streets. The community leaders - the leaders of the church disagreed with what He taught and with the example He was setting by the life he lived. We would look at those things and say, 'what's the problem? No big deal ... healing on the Sabbath, eating with tax collectors, eating without washing your hands. It is not good hygiene but certainly not the kind of thing that would cause us to hunt someone down and kill Him. But the next day after Jesus had stumped the Pharisee's following their 'greatest commandment' question the began the plotting to kill Him. And finally the day came, they had all of their ducks in a row and they nailed Jesus to a cross until He was dead. And they cheered. I know that there is a difference between the situations where in one case a Roman soldier can recognize the innocence of the one who had been put to death and more of the tyranny and craziness of the others continues to come out. But I picture the scene of both and I wonder how we are to understand this call to love God and neighbor. Can we cheer when anyone suffers? Can we cheer when even the most brutal dictator dies?

What is the holiness of God? What does it mean for us to be called to walk with God and have our lives shaped by a code of holiness? Where do we allow the hatred of the world to take over and love for our neighbor to stop? Do we draw the line at tyrants? Does that include the playground bullies? Or is it tyrants and religious teachers that don't teach what we teach? Do we love just the loveable or does Jesus really mean for us to love our enemy too?

Yes, loving God and neighbor are nice words that we love to quote in talking about what it means to be a Christian ... but in the real world it is an incredibly difficult challenge ... a challenge that we can only face by looking at the way that God demonstrated that very real love. Thanks be to God who has loved and calls us to love.

AMEN