

Narrative Lectionary- The Great Commandment
March 22, 2020

There is a famous story from the Jewish Talmud about a gentile who is interested in converting to Judaism, and he comes to the two best known rabbis of the day, Rabbi Shammai and Rabbi Hillel. Rabbi Shammai was a curmudgeon, he was rather cranky. The learner said, Rabbi, I'd like you to narrow down the Jewish law to just a summary that I can hear while I am balancing on one foot. Rabbi Shammai basically said, Get out of here. How can you expect me to distill the amazing Law of Moses into that short a sentence?

So the learner went to Rabbi Hillel and asked the same question. Rabbi Hillel agreed to the challenge, and he said, I'll summarize it for you as you stand there on one leg- Do not do to anyone that which is hateful to you. In other words, in the positive, Do unto others what you would want them to do to you. Or, love your neighbor as you love yourself.

A religious person comes to Jesus in our Gospel today and asks a similar question. Jesus, out of the all the 613 commandments of Moses, which one is the greatest? Jesus quotes one of the most important Jewish Scriptures; it's called the Shema- Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. An Orthodox Jew still places this verse from Deuteronomy 6 in a little box called a phylactery on his forehead and his wrist. It's placed on the doorpost of a house. So it wasn't any surprise that Jesus mentioned this verse. Love the Lord with everything you've got.

But then he adds a second one as well. You shall love your neighbor as yourself, from Leviticus 19. In Luke's version of this story, the man then asks, Well then, who is my neighbor? And Jesus tells the story of a man who is travelling and is beaten up by robbers and left in the ditch, and a couple of religious types go by on the other side of the road. But somebody very different- a Samaritan- Samaritans and Jews hated each other, they were on different sides of the theological aisle, among other differences- a Samaritan stops to help this Jewish man. Maybe it was like a man with a Make America Great Again hat stopping to help a Democratic Socialist. Jesus says, Loving your neighbor might involve someone really different from you. And you can't say you love God and not love your neighbor.

And do you notice the way this second commandment is phrased- Love your neighbor *as you love yourself*. We get to practice self-love. It's ok to have boundaries. It means we don't get so wrapped up in saving the world or in good deeds that we deplete ourselves. We need to nurture our spirits, our souls, our bodies, our minds, so that we have strength and energy to love our neighbor.

Some of you know the work of Father Greg Boyle and Homeboy Ministries down in Los Angeles. Father Boyle works with ex-gang members by offering practical job training and life skills, so they can go out in the work-world ready to be productive. Sometimes they have tattoos that can get in the way of finding work, and Father Boyle will pay to have those removed.

Some years ago I read an interview with Father Boyle. I thought he was going to talk about saving people, about rescuing people. Here's what Father Boyle said after years of doing this work. "Ministry aimed at saving people and the world instead leads to burnout. If the intent is to save people, or even to help people, then it works that way. You're going to be depleted.

"I used to think my job was saving lives. But now I think saving lives is for the Coast Guard. Our choice is always the same- *save* the world or *savor* it. And I vote for savoring it. And, just because everything is about something else, if you savor the world, somehow- go figure- you save it.

And then he says this, and I find it so helpful: "I talk a lot about kinship, and I say, "No kinship, no peace; no kinship, no justice; no kinship, no equality." We've become focused on peace, justice and equality, when the truth is, none of these things can happen unless there's some undergirding sense that we belong to each other, that we're connected, that we matter.

Then he says this: "We get so stumped by "I'm going to save the world" or "I'm going to build an orphanage." All those things are good; I don't mean to disparage activity. But we get tripped up and this is why people burn out and there's compassion fatigue or whatever you want to call it. But I learned a long time ago that no amount of me wanting that guy to have a life is the same as that guy wanting to have a life.

"So in the meantime, what do you do? You wait and you love and you cherish and you know that all mature spirituality is about tenderness. That's

the mark of mature spirituality, because tenderness is the connective tissue. It's the only thing that joins us together.”

One of the ways Father Boyle accomplishes this at Homeboy is when an ex-gang member begins training, he is introduced to everybody in that department. They walk down the line and shake the hands of people who used to be in opposing gangs. They learn to work beside their former enemies. It is kinship that leads to peace.

We're going to get chances to love our neighbors during these challenging times. But as we love our neighbor, what will it mean not to save the world, because Jesus did that on the cross, (John 12:32) but to savor the world? To savor those relationships with people who are different from us? To savor how we are changed through the other?

Jesus warns about religion that is all show at the end of this passage, about religious leaders who walk around in long robes (uh oh) and just want respect. They want the best seats at banquets and they devour widow's houses, as they say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation. This is in contrast to love of neighbor.

And at the end of the passage, a crowd of wealthy people is putting money into the temple treasury, and making quite a show of it. And a poor widow comes along and puts everything she has in the offering, just two small copper coins. We've often heard this as a stewardship sermon. Look at this great act of faith here! But perhaps he is noticing that she only has a little bit to give because she has been conned out of her house by religious charlatans. She has not been cared for as a neighbor in need. My guess is the crowd doesn't even notice her. But Jesus does. And he condemns those who haven't taken care of this neighbor.

This Covid-19 pandemic is going to give us opportunities to be neighbor to each other, to safely reach out in love and service. It won't earn us credit with God- it's our response to God's unconditional love for us. Our Youth Ministry Coordinator Dez is forming a team of folks who will reach out in some very practical ways. Be watching for details. Amen.