

"Loving Our Neighbors"
Sermon for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year A
October 26, 2008
Text: Matthew 22:34-46
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There are some of the teachings of Jesus that we have heard so often, we fail to think critically about them. They may have become overly familiar to us, so much so that we take them for granted without feeling the need to unpack them, to examine them more closely, to ask some important questions about them. I think this is true of what Jesus is teaching in our Gospel lesson from Matthew for this morning. Jesus says that there is a first commandment, that is, to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds. In other words, we are to love God with all our being. We are to share with God, in the words of our passage from 1 Thessalonians for this morning, "our own selves." *We love God by giving to him all of who we are.*

I believe that we understand what Jesus is insisting here that we do. We know how we are to relate to God in the way Jesus wants us to, though we may have trouble doing it at times. It's that word "all" that trips us up, doesn't it? *All*. That's a lot. In fact, that's everything. It's a real challenge to give ourselves completely to God, even if we know it would be in our best interest to do so. But if we

are ever going to be able to give ourselves completely to another person, as we should in our most intimate relationships, we need to begin with God. After all, if we can't trust God enough to be fully open and giving and loving, who can we trust enough to do so?

Jesus goes on to offer a second commandment which he suggests is equal in importance to the first or greatest one. We are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We may think we understand exactly what this commandment means as well. And we might. But I want to raise at least the possibility that we may have missed some of the subtle implications of what Jesus is instructing us to do by loving the neighbor as we do ourselves. So I want to ask a couple of questions about this commandment just to make sure we really get what is going on here.

First, does loving the neighbor as we do ourselves mean that we are to love other people *as much as we love ourselves*? Maybe not. In some cases we may love ourselves too much. If we are narcissistic, that is, completely self-occupied, self-centered, and self-absorbed, we are going to find it extremely difficult to love others at all, much less to love them as much as we love ourselves. When we live in such a way as to believe it's all about us, that we are the center of the universe, that everyone around us is to serve our needs—we are not going to be able to give our whole selves or even a small part of

ourselves to others in a loving way. If we love ourselves too much, we don't need to be trying to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves, because there is no way we can do that.

But while it may be true that some of us love ourselves too much, the truth is that most of us love ourselves too little. We don't feel very good about ourselves. We are self-conscious. We are insecure and suffer from rather low self-esteem. We see ourselves as not being deserving of a great deal of love.

You may not realize it, but *the root of sin is self-hate*. It is not self-love; it is self-hate. And if we fail to love ourselves as we should, there also is no way we can extend love to other people. Think about it. If we don't feel good about ourselves, what is our natural tendency? To put other people down, to be critical or judgmental of others, or to make life difficult for other people—all as a means of making ourselves feel better. And that is not loving at all. We can only love our neighbors as ourselves if we have an appropriate amount of self-love. Only if we have matured to the place where we feel realistically good about ourselves as lovable and capable children of God can we love our neighbors as we are called to by Jesus.

So to love the neighbor as ourselves may not necessarily mean that we are to love other people as much as we love ourselves, because we may be guilty of loving ourselves either too much or too

little, and either way we will find it difficult to reach out to others in love. But there is another question we can ask of this commandment as well. Does it mean to love our neighbors *in the same way* we love ourselves?

Before we answer this second question, we need to make sure we realize that when Jesus is talking about love, he is talking about more than a feeling. He is calling us to action. He doesn't mean that we should think kind thoughts or wish someone well. In fact, it doesn't really matter how we feel. Love is something we do even if, and perhaps especially when, we don't feel like it. What matters is what we do, what actions we take. When our actions are faithful and consistent, our feelings will follow in good time. In other words, loving *actions* are to come first; loving *feelings* most likely will come later. We know what love is because Jesus reached out to us, lived for us, and died for us. In the words of a song I remember from my college days, "love is something you do when Jesus Christ is living in you." [Christine P. Lee, *Circuit Rider*, July/August, 2005, p. 31].

Let me now ask the question again. **Does loving the neighbor as we love ourselves mean that we love other people in the same way we love ourselves?** After all, isn't that what the Golden Rule states? Love means doing, and the Golden Rule teaches that we are to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Isn't that the best way to

act toward other people? Maybe. That certainly is a good place to start. As we contemplate our actions toward other people, we ought to ask what we would want to see done in that situation.

For instance, we might go out of our way to make a visitor to our church feel welcome because we would want to be welcomed if we were a visitor. We might go see someone who is in the hospital because we would like the same thing done for us. We might take food over to a family in which there has been a death because such an act of kindness is something we would want to receive in a similar circumstance.

We might call a fellow congregation member we haven't seen at church in a while because if we were absent we would want someone to miss us. We might pray for someone going through some difficulty because we know how much we appreciate being prayed for. Imagining what we might want or need in a given situation is a good place to start to begin to act in a loving way toward other people.

But I want to suggest that while that may be true in some, perhaps in many cases, it is not true in all cases. The most loving thing I can do for someone else is not always the thing I would want done for me. Why? *Because we often are so different.* We are different; we are not all alike. And that means that we have different needs,

different ways of thinking and feeling, and different preferences for how we want most to be treated.

This is especially true in our intimate relationships. You know what I mean if you think about it. I know it is true in our house. Stephanie and I love each other very much, and so we certainly want to follow the Golden Rule in our marriage. But Stephanie and I are different in a lot of ways.

Part of those differences stem from gender characteristics. I'm a guy, and in many ways that is a terrible relational obstacle to overcome. Stephanie sent me an e-mail the other day that included an astute observation about happiness between men and women. It said: To be happy with a man, a woman must understand him a lot and love him a little. To be happy with a woman, a man must love her a lot and not try to understand her at all. It's true that we men have trouble at times knowing what women want and need. So what do we do? We tend to relate to them as we would want to be related to or as we feel most men would want to be related to. Is that a good idea? Perhaps some of the time, but not all the time.

For example, when I am upset about something—when something is really bothering me, when I am frustrated or depressed—what do I want? I want to be left alone. Just stay out of my way until I have come to terms with whatever I am dealing with. Give me my space.

Let me be. I don't want anyone close to me when I'm in such a state. The most loving thing you can do for me in times like that is to back off, way off. That's doing for me as I want done for me in that situation.

But Stephanie is the complete opposite. She occasionally gets upset, bothered, frustrated, or depressed. And so my first impulse when I realize the place she is in is to back off, way off. I leave her alone. I tip-toe as far away from her as I can. I give her all the space possible. Why? Because that's exactly what I would want if I were Stephanie. However, that is not at all what she wants from me in those times. That's when she wants to be made to feel close. That's when she wants me to be the most present to her and available for her. That's when she needs to feel my understanding, support, and encouragement. The last thing she wants and needs from me is distance.

All this is to say that *loving others in the same way we love ourselves doesn't always turn out to be the most loving way we can act*, because we are so different. We don't speak the same language of love, yet all of us want to be accepted and respected and valued. So we can't always simply do unto others as we would have them do unto us. That's not enough in every case. The love we have *for* our neighbors and the kind of love we genuinely want and need *from* our

neighbors, is the kind of love that is able to transcend differences. It is the kind of love that does what is most wanted and needed, even if and especially if that is not what we might want or need. That's true love for our neighbors, that's love in any language, and that's the kind of love Jesus wants us to exhibit in all of our relationships.