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October 29, 2017 ❖ Matthew 22: 34-46 & Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18

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“The Law of Love.”

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

That was the question some religious leaders had asked of Jesus. And as soon as he heard the question he knew it was a trap, and I’ll tell you why in a moment.

But first, a bit of Bible trivia. The rabbis of old had counted a total of 613 commands or commandments in the whole body of divine law. There were 248 positive commands, a number which they believed corresponded to the number of parts of a human body. And there were 365 negative commands, a number that corresponds to the number of days in a year. So, there you have it!

Now, back to the question that was asked of Jesus: “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Why was it a trap? Well, while I’m sure that rabbis occasionally speculated about which commands were more important than others, there nevertheless seems to have been a general consensus that only God had the authority to prioritize his commands. And, therefore,

any human who might attempt to do so, was guilty of putting himself on a par with God. And that's blasphemy.

And so, that's where the trap lay; and if Jesus had answered as they had hoped he would, he would have fallen into their trap. But Jesus didn't fall into their trap. In fact, his answer was something they *had* to agree with. And this is what he said:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’ (Deut. 6:5). This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev. 19:18). On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

That statement from our gospel reading is what we refer to as the Summary of the Law. And so, instead of prioritizing the commands, and thus falling into their trap, Jesus simply summed up the intent and purpose of all of the commands and commandments, and he did so — and this is key — with words attributed to God.

As people of faith, I think it's good to be reminded that all of God's commands, and expectations, can be summed up in those two statements: Love God, and love your neighbor.

But there's something else in what Jesus said that we need to pay attention to. After reciting the command from Deuteronomy, about loving God, Jesus said that there was a second command that was "like" the first. That word "like" doesn't mean what it sounds like to us. The Greek word that Jesus used, that got translated into English as "like," doesn't mean that the two commands are similar, but rather that the two commands are inseparable and of equal importance.

In other words, Jesus *isn't* saying that our first priority is to love God, and that our second priority is to love our neighbor. Rather, Jesus is saying that our love of neighbor is *intimately connected* to our love of God; and that our love of God is intimately connected to our love of neighbor.

And that can pose a problem for some people. Like me! Because, while loving God is something most of us can undertake

fairly easily, loving our neighbor can sometimes be a challenge; and especially if that neighbor is someone we don't even like.

Peggy and I have such a neighbor...

...and since I don't like that neighbor one bit, it seems that loving him is out of the question. Or so it seems.

That's why I'm grateful for something that the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once wrote: Love of neighbor...

“...does not mean merely cordiality of affection for our personal friends; it means a zeal for the welfare of all men, whether they are congenial to us or not. It is not our friends that we are bidden to love but our neighbor. A man chooses his friends; but he finds his neighbors provided for him. It is our relations with those chance people with whom the accidents of life have brought us into contact which are the test of our Christian spirit. ... If a man can succeed in being invariably

courteous and considerate in dealing with his neighbor, that man has some measure of the spirit of Christ.”

I like that quote because it reminds me that loving my neighbor does not necessarily means that I have to feel any sort of *affection* for him; just that I act in ways that are beneficial and helpful to him. Or, at the very least, I *don't* act in ways that are detrimental or prejudicial towards him.

And that gibes completely with the context of the command to love neighbor. You see, the command “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” comes at the end of a section in Leviticus 19 that describes how we are to relate to our neighbor. Here are some of the things we’re told to do:

When you harvest your crops, you shall leave the corners and edges of your fields unharvested, so the poor can have what’s left. You shall not steal from your neighbor. You shall not cheat your neighbor. You shall not lie *to* your neighbor. You shall not tell lies

about your neighbor to others. If you hire your neighbor to do a job, you pay him quickly and fairly. You shall not take advantage of a neighbor with a disability. When giving testimony in court, you shall tell the whole truth, and leave nothing out. You shall treat all people with the same regard. And, you shall take no vengeance or bear any grudge against your neighbor.

Or, in other words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now, I’m going to do something I haven’t done in a very long time: I’m going to end my sermon by describing the story-line of a country-western song.

One morning, a mother found under her plate at breakfast a bill made out by her young son, aged 8. It read: “Mommy owes Danny: for taking out the garbage, 50 cents; for helping with the dishes, 75 cents; for being good, 50

cents; for taking music lessons, 55 cents; for extras, 25 cents. Total owed: 2 dollars and 55 cents.”

The mother smiled but made no comment. At lunch, Danny found the bill along with 2 dollars and 55 cents under his plate, and another piece of paper neatly folded like the first. Opening it, he read: “Danny owes Mommy: for nursing him through chicken pox, nothing; for clothes, shoes, and toys, nothing; for cleaning his room and changing his bed, nothing; for cooking his meals, nothing. Total owed, nothing.”

What’s the greatest commandment in the law? Just this: that we love God, *and* one another, as God has loved us all. It’s as simple as that.

Amen.