The Second Greatest Commandment

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Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
Matthew 22:34-46

Debie Thomas, writing at JourneyWithJesus.net, observes that Jesus answered this question in tense circumstances. He'd been debating the faith's most powerful leaders for some days. A fair number of their questions, or so it seems, had been designed to trap him into blasphemy, which they could punish, or politically risk, to run him afoul of the Roman authorities, or to put him at odds with the people who were following him and surrounding him and protecting him. It was a high anxiety situation when they asked, "Teacher, which commandment is the greatest?"

Debie Thomas writes, "But when he is asked what matters most in a life of faith, Jesus doesn't say, 'Believe the right things.' He doesn't say, 'Maintain personal and doctrinal purity.' He doesn't say, 'Worship like this or attend a church like that.' He doesn't even say, 'Read your Bible,' or 'Pray every day,' or 'Preach the Gospel to every living creature.' He says, 'Love.' That's it. All of Christianity distilled down to its essence so that maybe we'll pause long enough to hear it. Love. Love God and love your neighbor."

Despite the tension of the setting, neither the question nor the answer was particularly unusual in first century Judaism. Especially among the Pharisees, this kind of theological discussion was common. I have great difficulty, in fact, in seeing this question as a trap for Jesus. A test, perhaps. But unlike some of the other things people had asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" isn't a trap. It's a foundation for understanding what else a teacher would say. And the commandments themselves were quotes from the Scriptures: Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

Zina Jacque writes at Working Preacher, "Jesus's answer—love God with everything you have, and love your neighbor as yourself—would have found immediate recognition from everyone within earshot. Rabbi Akiva, whose teaching is preserved in the Sifra (Kedoshim 2:4.12), called the Levitical command to love your neighbor the great principle of Torah. Hillel, a generation before Jesus, had said the same thing to a gentile who asked for the whole Torah summarized: That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow—this is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a).

"So Jesus is not introducing a new idea. He is stating what everyone already knows. And that is precisely the problem.

“The Pharisees know the answer. Jesus knows they know. The crowd knows. There is no debate about the content of the commandment. The failure has never been informational. The failure is always somewhere between the knowing and the doing, in the space where we understand perfectly what love requires and find ourselves, quietly and repeatedly, unable to deliver it.”

Love God. Love your neighbor. The greatest and the second greatest commandment.

I know that both are challenging. So for today I’m focusing on the second commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself.

The nineteenth chapter of Leviticus has some interesting features. It doesn’t have one of the primary attributes of law, or statute, that would make these directions enforceable: it doesn’t set consequences for breaking them. The laws in chapter twenty do. The directives of the nineteenth chapter, appear oriented toward fostering a healthy community without burdening it with judicial proceedings. It’s also well aware that “love your neighbor as yourself” needs some expansion. It forbids lying. It forbids stealing, which includes withholding the wages of a laborer until the next morning. It directs farmers to leave a line of unharvested grain at the edges of their fields for the poor and the visitor to eat.

It forbids favor in judgement either for the rich or for the poor. It directs us even to reprove our neighbor when they seem to be breaking these laws – before it gets to court.

This kind of love for neighbor isn’t emotional. I don’t have to like my neighbor in order to love them. The thirteenth century theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote, “Since to love a thing is to will it good, in a twofold way anything may be loved more, or less. In one way on the part of the act of the will itself, which is more or less intense.” The essential element is to will good to the neighbor. Yes, it might be a stronger or weaker feeling – I admit I find loving some people rather difficult – but it’s the will for their good that matters.

Will is choice. Will is action. Will is commitment. Will becomes a series of decisions to act in the best interest of your neighbor.

What is your will?

Some people make it easy to love them. The most obvious way to do that is to act loving, isn’t it? It feels good to do loving things for someone who is also acting in a loving way.

It’s also easier to love someone who is clear about how to love them, who tells you what they need and what they don’t. It’s one thing to will someone good – it’s another thing to know what that good is and to put the resources together to bring it. Some people struggle to be clear about their needs. That might be because of pride – personally, I don’t like it when I’m needy. I don’t like to feel vulnerable. I don’t want to tell you how you can help. When I keep silent, I make it harder to love me.

Others simply may not know what they need. This might be because they're young – youth and inexperience mean that someone may not be familiar with the options. It might be because they're ill. My ability to treat my own sicknesses has its limits. It might be because of harder things: trauma, mental illness, addiction.

More often, though, people do know, and that's particularly true of people with disabilities. Earlier this month the US Department of Justice reversed itself and ceased defending the rules that require states offering federally funded services to disabled persons to provide them in the most integrated setting. So instead of living independently in their own homes, disabled people may find themselves forced into other living situations against their will, settings that they do not, in fact, need.

Shades of Kalaupapa, yes?

I suspect that many of you have already voted – I have, in fact – so it's probably too late for me to suggest that "love your neighbor" should guide your vote. It should have. Or it should. Hawai'i's motto gives us that guidance: "Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono" ("the life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness"). Pono is a fruit of aloha. Righteousness is a manifestation of love.

Candidates who encourage or demonstrate cruelty, who clearly favor their own interests or the interests of their preferred community, don't deserve your vote. I hope that in most cases you find that's a difficult choice to make because the candidates have displayed care and compassion for everyone, that they have revealed their aloha and pono.

I really hope and pray that we rarely find ourselves choosing the best of the worst.

I'm glad we have this text for our observance of All Saints. Today we remember, honor, and celebrate our 'ohana, friends, colleagues, and fellow human beings who loved us, whom we loved, and who went from our care to God's in the last twelve months. We hold them in our hearts today because we miss them. We hold them in our prayers today because we are grateful for their presence in our lives. We hold them in our memories today because their wisdom and example still guide us.

They showed us what it means to love our neighbor.

Were they perfect? No. They made mistakes. They misread our needs, or they didn't tell us their needs. Sometimes they chose their own interests over the good of all, and sometimes they didn't realize it, and sometimes they knew it and did it anyway. Sometimes they apologized. Sometimes they didn't.

Over the years, however, mostly they did their best to love and care for us. Some of them were our parents, some were our siblings, some were our friends. We knew some of them for years and years; we met some of them relatively recently. We remember their smiles. We remember

their words of comfort and wisdom. We remember their laughter. We remember the times they held us as we wept.

They loved us. They willed good for us. They did good with us.

As Debie Thomas writes, "…this is the call. Which means that we have a God who first and foremost wants our love — not our fear, penitence, or piety. And we have a God who wants every one of God's children to also feel loved. By us. Not shamed. Not punished. Not chastised. Not judged. But loved."

Love God. Love your neighbor.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson