

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE LOVE BETWEEN THE BROTHERS AND THE SISTERS

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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Matthew 22: 34-40 (NEB)

Hearing that he had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees met together; and one of their number tested him with this question; “Master, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.” That is the greatest commandment. It comes first. The second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Everything in the Law and the prophets hangs on these two commandments.”

I read or heard recently, “Every time I try to get close to God Jesus puts a neighbor in the way.”

A Pharisee asked Jesus which is the greatest commandment in all of Jewish law. Notice that the Pharisee asked about the greatest commandment, not commandments. He did not ask for his favorites or the top ten. He did not ask Jesus which of the Ten Commandments was most important; or which of the 613 laws of Torah was quintessential. Remember that Pharisees prided themselves on observing all 613 laws. The Pharisee asked for just one.

Jesus did not answer the question posed by the lawyer. Jesus gave two answers, or at least an answer with two vitally connected parts. The first part is known, even today, as Shema Israel, “Hear O Israel.” We find it in the book of Deuteronomy, 6: 4, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength.” In the 21st century the Shema continues to be the center of the Jewish prayer book. It is the bold declaration of radical monotheism, Judaism’s gift to religion. The Shema is the most important

part of Hebrew prayer life and the devout Jew hopes that the last mortal words that he or she utters is the Shema.

The other side of the coin of Jesus' answer is from Leviticus 19:18, "You shall not seek revenge, or cherish anger towards you kinsfolk; you shall love your neighbor as a man like yourself. I am the Lord." Is it not challenging that in the era of "shock and awe," and when the American Broadcasting Company runs a primetime television drama titled "Revenge," Deuteronomy says there is a relationship between loving your neighbor and your anger and desire for revenge. That old Jew must have known something about human nature. The Deuteronomist did not say we are never supposed to get angry. He wrote about cherishing the anger. He wrote about holding that anger up like it was the Medal of Freedom.

In the spring of 1894, the Baltimore Orioles went to Boston to play a baseball game. The Orioles' John McGraw got into a fight with the Boston third baseman. Within minutes all the players from both teams had joined in the brawl. The warfare quickly spread to the grandstands. Among the fans the conflict went from bad to worse. Someone set fire to the stands and the entire ballpark burned to the ground. Not only that, but the fire spread to 107 other Boston buildings as well.¹

Ben Franklin once said, "Whatever is begun in anger ends in shame."

I dare say this nation is angry. We are filled with the lust for revenge or to "get even." People are unhappy and we are taking it out on each other. It almost seems like we are angry and proud of it. We are angry and we like it. We are angry and you had better not get in the way of our wrath, or by God, we will cut you down.

¹ *Daily Bread*, August 13, 1992; Sermon Illustrations; <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/a/anger.html>, downloaded October 22, 2011.

Oops, what was that I said, “by God?” We are never going to love God or our neighbor as long as we cherish our anger more.

Many contemporary readers of the New Testament hear these commandments as two separate laws and there has always been a conversation about how one must love God and then one’s neighbor. Or, you cannot love your neighbor until you first love God. Theistic Buddhists might point out that it is only by loving the neighbor that one can love God or that loving the neighbor leads one to God.

I would like to propose that Jesus’ answer is so intertwined as to be inseparable. Jesus did not answer the Pharisee’s question with just one law or commandment. He gave two with hardly a pause in between. Loving God and loving neighbor is the warp and woof of both Judaism and Christianity. It is the fundamental foundation of our religion on which everything else, and I mean everything, in our faith is contingent upon and dependent on. There is no other theological issue that takes precedent over the love of God and neighbor. There is no creed that supercedes this great law. There is no doctrine, or credo, or congregational polity that is more important than the love of God and neighbor. Peter, Paul, and Mary got it right when they sang, “It’s all about the love between the brothers and the sisters, all over this land.

This is something the Pharisee should have known. He was learned in Torah and the entire Hebrew Bible rests on these sacred principles. In fact, it is when Jews and Christians stray from this foundation that the community loses its moral compass and becomes consumed by greed and violence. Inevitably when our love for God

wanes we disregard the larger human family. When compassion for the plight of human beings diminishes God seems to fade away from our hearts.

Recall the CNN/Tea Party debate of September 12th. CNN's Wolf Blitzer asked candidate Ron Paul a hypothetical question about health care reform. Here is how Michael Muskal of the *Los Angeles Times* reported a portion of it.

"A healthy, 30-year-old young man has a good job, makes a good living, but decides: You know what? I'm not going to spend 200 or 300 dollars a month for health insurance, because I'm healthy; I don't need it," Blitzer said. "But you know, something terrible happens; all of a sudden, he needs it. Who's going to pay for it, if he goes into a coma, for example? Who pays for that?"

"In a society that you accept welfarism and socialism, he expects the government to take care of him," Paul replied. Blitzer asked what Paul would prefer to having government deal with the sick man.

"What he should do is whatever he wants to do, and assume responsibility for himself," Paul said. "My advice to him would have a major medical policy, but not before —"

"But he doesn't have that," Blitzer said. "He doesn't have it and he's — and he needs — he needs intensive care for six months. Who pays?"

"That's what freedom is all about: taking your own risks.," Paul said, repeating the standard libertarian view as some in the audience cheered.

"But congressman, are you saying that society should just let him die," Blitzer asked.

"Yeah," came the shout from the audience. That affirmative was repeated at least three times. Paul, who has always had a reputation for being a charitable man, disagreed with the idea that sick people should die, but insisted that the answer to the healthcare problem was not a large government."²

² Michael Muskal, "Support at GOP debate for letting the uninsured die," *Los Angeles Times*, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/sep/13/news/la-pn-ron-paul-gop-debate-20110913>, downloaded October 22, 2011

Now please note, Ron Paul did not say the man should die. I am not here to argue Ron Paul's politics. I am distressed by the audience's trifecta response, "yeah," meaning, "Let him die."

There is a growing callousness in the United States that directly erodes the quality of life and the dignity of human beings. Name any issue – immigration, homelessness, unemployment, women's reproductive health, capital punishment, health care, education and you will hear a growing chorus of angry voices that demand "every man for himself." "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps." Of course, people who insist that this 19th century English quip is the foundation of American economy do not realize that pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps is impossible. This is satire, not an economic policy. You can no more pull yourself up by your bootstraps than you can pull yourself up by the scruff of your collar or your ponytail.

As soon as we say, "let him die," or "every man for himself" we can no longer say, "In God we trust." Trust in God has always been a communal affair. And if you ask, "Where is that in the Bible?" the answer is, "It is the entire Bible." From the community in the Garden of Eden to the community of the gathered saints in John's *Revelation*, God is always about the human family. God has always been about the Hebrew people, even the remnant and the exiled. God has always been about the nation Israel. God remains to this day the God of the generations gathered in homes and congregations. And if we dare claim that we are "one nation under God," we had best equip ourselves to care for the vulnerable, the alien, the poor, the imprisoned, the mentally ill, the elderly, and the increasing numbers of people who spend most of their

lives on the margins of the American dream. If we do not see their needs as essential to national interests we must remove “In God we Trust” from our currency and “one nation under God” from the pledge of allegiance.

I am not prescribing how that is best achieved. It is not my place to create political platforms or solutions. My role as preacher of the gospel is to remind us that the needy are ever close to the heart of God. As God claims them so we are claimed to beat the swords in plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. We are claimed for the restoration of human dignity, the grace of work at a living wage, the comfort of shelter and clothing, the basic safety and education of children – ours and theirs.

Hear again the story of the medieval village in Poland. The little town was overtaken by a large band of rogue German warriors. They rode into the town astride armored horses, and they themselves were plated for warfare. A broad sword was girded to their waists, a round metal shield strapped to their left arms, and each carried a lance with glinting, razor sharp points. Women and children wept as they rode into the town. The men hid or held their heads down in submission. Dogs yammered and yelped in fear.

The Teutons took up residence in a darkened manor that overlooked the town. Soon orders were given that the Jews be herded into one small neighborhood and forced to remain there. They could not leave the ghetto to go to work in their shops or fields. Because they could not work they could not buy food and their children would cry themselves to sleep at night. You could not hear their weeping over the growl of hunger in their bellies. Even the Jewish bakers and butchers could not leave to

neighborhood to buy wheat or chickens. Some would sneak out at night to pick food out of trashcans: rotting potatoes or cabbage, moldy cheese or bread, and chicken bones for soup. Those who were caught were killed on the spot.

With the onset of winter the last bit of coal for heating burned away, even in the most cautious and conservative households. Beds, chairs, and tables were cut up for firewood. Soon every hearth was stone cold. The winter winds blew down the chimney swirling clouds of ash. People wore as many layers of clothing and blankets as they could stretch over their bodies. But it was never enough. The elderly were the first die, followed by young children and newborns. With emaciated bodies the village Jews gathered for Shabbat. A small light flickered from the stub of the last Shabbos candle. I imagine you could hear their rasping voices saying, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength."

Soon everything was gone and the men of the congregation went to the Rabbi. Rabbi was very old and withered. An entourage always surrounded him for fear that the least breeze would blow him away. They loved the old man. He officiated over the Bris Milah of nearly every man and boy in the community; consecrated countless marriages; tutored children in Hebrew, preparing them for their bar or bat mitzvahs; and occasionally he adjudicated squabbles, lawsuits, and divorces. He was the center of their congregation. But what could this rabbi possibly do in the face of such power and evil?

He thought and prayed about it for a very long time. One day he wrapped his scarf around his neck, put on his heavy black caftan, and pulled his black hat down as far as he could so the wind would not blow it off. At the gate of his house he took a long and loving look at his home and wondered if he would ever see it again. With great effort he walked from his house to the desolate mansion.

Within an hour the Rabbi managed to hobble up to the thick oak doors of the mansion. Laughter and song pealed out of the walls of the house. The Rabbi could hear the clinking of glasses and forks scraping across the metal dishes. He knocked on the door with his knuckles. No one heard him. He then pounded on the door as hard as he could. His hands hurt. Finally, he took his walking stick and rapped forcefully on the door. There was a moment of silence and an order was barked out to a servant.

The servant opened the door in disbelief. He let the old man inside and quickly slammed the door to keep out the winter. The Rabbi nearly gagged at the rich aroma of food. Cautiously the servant approached the head of the table and spoke nervously to the commanding officer. The young chieftain arose from the table. He sloshed back the swallow of wine in his cup and threw it at the Rabbi. With fire in his eyes he strode around the end of the table and marched toward the Teacher. His footsteps fell loudly and forcefully on the floor, echoing off the stone walls.

He stood before the Rabbi who could feel the hot breath and spittle of the angry lord. "What is it Jew?" he demanded.

“Sir,” began the wizened Scholar, “my people are hungry because you refuse to allow them to work and earn their bread. They are cold because you do not allow them to buy coal or go into the forests to cut wood. They are dying of malnutrition and the children are sick. I beg you, sir, what will you do for my people?”

The warlord flamed up in rage and with the back of his left hand he smacked the Jew with all of his might. The Rabbi was thrown across the room. His teeth clitter-clattered across the floor. Blood gushed from his mouth and nose.”

The pain was so intense he could hardly catch his breath. With every bit of courage and strength that the Rabbi could muster he forced himself to his feet. He staggered and then walked to the commandant. The Rabbi wiped his bloody face on the sleeve of his coat. “That sir is what you will do for me. But now I beg you, what will you do for my people?”

There are many very bright people in this room this morning. There are many more in this city and across the nation. We would struggle long and hard to find a real solution to the problems of poverty and homelessness. But the Rabbi teaches me this: loving my neighbor does not always mean having the right answer, or political solution, or social policy. But if I am going to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, then I must ask every form of power, “what are you doing for our people?” My neighbor’s needs are my own. His or her destiny is inextricably tied to my own and that of my children. We are never so weak, so tired, or so confused that we cannot ask about the well being of others. We are never so faithful as when we take the hands of broken people and restore them to health. Even if we cannot cure them we can

comfort them. We can speak when they cannot. We can represent them when they do not know how to. We can always ask the question, “What will you do for God’s people?”

Every congregation has a huge agenda. There are committees to run, programs to maintain, and budgets to sustain. These are all necessary. Just remember the words of Jesus, everything – everything – hangs on these two laws:

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength.” “You shall not seek revenge, or cherish anger towards you kinsfolk; you shall love your neighbor as a man or a woman like yourself. I am the Lord.”

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