

## **YOU WANT ME TO LOVE WHOM?**

The Rev. Mark Wilkinson, Rector  
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church  
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I was all set today to preach on the intersection of our collect and the love your neighbor theme of the gospel. In the collect we ask God to increase the gifts of faith hope and charity. This was a great set up for the message that Holly Waide will share with you shortly about our youth mission trip this summer. I was going to talk about how charity in the terms of the Latin *caritas* means far more than just doing good deeds. I was going to preach about how *caritas* implies these acts are done not out of responsibility and obligation, but out of love of our neighbor.

However life and the Spirit have intervened. So hold onto that quick explanation of charity until Holly has her chance to speak.

First of all please understand that Jesus says that these two commandments love God and love your neighbor are so important that all the other commandments hang on these two. Think in terms of the image of a door with two hinges. The two hinges on which the door hangs and moves are these two commandments.

The world presented me with one of the thorniest aspects of this passage this week as I sat down early in the week to begin my prayer and research about the gospel message to love your neighbor. As I was reading the passage my computer pops up with the news flash that Qaddafi had been caught and killed. I found myself thinking, how do you love your neighbor when someone like Qaddafi is your neighbor? Jesus could not have meant that. In fact the last time I preached on this passage many raised that exact issue. What do you do about those neighbors who intend you or your country harm?

Yet this all inclusive view of neighbor is exactly what Jesus has in mind. For thousands of years the Pharisees, Sadducees and priests had defined neighbor as the other members of the nation of Israel. Jesus however says not so fast and makes this painfully clear in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is very clear in this radical redefinition of neighbor.

This message of love your neighbor is even more remarkable when you look at the setting of this teaching. Jesus has just finished several parables that have taken the Pharisees and the Sadducees to task for how they are leading the people of Israel astray. The Sadducees have been silenced in the answer Jesus gives them about life after death. Now the Pharisees take their turn and challenge him with the question about what is the greatest commandment. The language in the original Greek makes clear that this is not a friendly question, but a bitter challenge.

The Pharisees are not friends or supporters, but enemies. The question itself is nothing extraordinary. The topic of heavy and light commandments had gone on for centuries. When you have 615 commandments, 365 though shalt nots, intentionally one for every day of the year, how can anyone remember all of them much less follow them was a common question. The way the question was asked makes a difference. This question is framed in a confrontational manner.

Also remember that Jesus is preaching this message to the very people who will in just a few days time arrest him, try him, and crucify him. The word enemy or enemies appears in the bible almost 500 times, making it one of the more common words. The word, enemies, in particular, shows up 325 times of which almost 300 are in the Hebrew Scriptures. These are filled with those wonderful images of the psalms in particular that call for bashing of heads, slaying of enemies and other gruesome ways to deal with enemies. The word appears 25 times in the New Testament and guess what, most of those references and almost all of the times Jesus uses the word has to do with love and forgiveness.

I wrestled with this for several days until the Spirit was kind enough to whack me up side of the head with a hint. I have a wonderful app from Mission St. Claire on my iPhone for daily Morning Prayer. Yes there is an app for that. I just touch the app on the phone and the complete service with readings and prayers pops up. I must admit it is a bit of challenge getting used to praying with my phone in my hand instead of the book, but it does get me out of my rut of the usual prayers of petition and thanksgiving since each day is a different set. On Thursday the prayers of intercession included a prayer for enemies and I thought wow, this is just what I needed to hear.

The prayer is on page 816 of the BCP:

O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth; deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now part of the message here is that we control how we react to situations. We cannot control another's actions, but we can control our own actions. Note that the prayer asks God to lead them and us, deliver them and us in ways that ultimately lead to reconciliation. We are asking God to help us change.

Jesus also does not let the Pharisees off the hook. He knows they are his enemies and what follows today's passage is a stern lecture of warnings of various woes to them if they do not heed his teachings. He castigates them for their hollow worship practices and calls them to a new relationship with God. He is a truth teller and we know what often happens to truth tellers. The end is often not pretty and no truth teller ever gets elected to a position of power. Being a truth teller is also a way to love your neighbor.

St. Francis leads us into an even more profound way to live into the message of love your neighbor in a famous prayer of his.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Think carefully about what each of these statements asks us to do. I encourage you to read this prayer one sentence or phrase at a time and ask how can I live this prayer in such a way that I live Christ's teaching to love my neighbor as myself.

Ultimately we come back to talking about the work that our youth did this summer. To be honest, most of us probably would not choose to have the homeowners our youth worked with as friends. We may have trouble considering them neighbors, but they are. St. Francis understood this. The challenge of living into St. Francis' prayer is that we often reach out our hand in love only to have it rejected. The hard work is that Jesus teaches us that we must continue to try. Even if the means reaching out our hand 7 times 70.

There is no harder lesson in all of scripture, but on this statement hangs all the law and the prophets. This law is that important.