

**Proper 25A, October 25, 2020, St. Anne's
Deuteronomy 34:1–12; Psalm 90:1–6, 13–17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1–8; Matthew 22:34–46**

In today's gospel, when Jesus is asked what really matters, he says, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself." In other words, we are to devote our *entire self* to love, with everything we are and everything we have. Which is, in some ways, the simplest of commands – it's also, by far, the hardest to actually *live out* in our lives.

To our ears the idea of being *commanded* to love is strange, but partly that's because we 'hear' this differently than Jesus' contemporaries would have. We live in a very individualist culture, but first-century Mediterranean people were extremely group oriented. In Jesus' time they believed that a meaningful life required total reliance on the group in which you were embedded - your family, your village, your ethnic group etc. In various ways these groups provided you with a sense of self – the standards of your group was your 'conscience'. This meant there was very little interest in what we would call psychological states. So words about what **we** think of as *internal* states like love, in the biblical context indicate a corresponding *external* action.

For us spirituality and faith are usually thought of as an internal state – something we feel or think. So, *we* think faith is about *feeling* a certain way about God or *believing* certain things *about* God. And in a similar way we think of love as an emotion – a warm, wonderful feeling that we experience. Which makes this saying difficult for us since we simply **don't**, and indeed **can't**, love everyone in the world in that way. We don't even **like** everyone, let alone *love* them. And in truth some people are *not* very 'loveable' – they're nasty, bad tempered, hurtful... some

are even evil. But in the first-century Mediterranean world, ‘love’ was not a warm feeling towards someone, but a pattern of *action*. The biblical understanding of “love” might be better translated as ‘attachment’ or ‘commitment’. So to ‘love someone’ meant to be devoted to their interests. There may or may not be *affection*, but it’s the inward feeling of *attachment* along with the outward behaviour bound up with that attachment that’s ‘love’ in Jesus’ world.

So in today’s passage when Jesus says "to love God with all one's heart, etc." it means total attachment and devotion to God - and thus to *God’s* priorities and will. And likewise, "to love one's neighbour" is to be committed to them **as if** they *were* your own family. So when Jesus said, "love your neighbour as yourself," he was essentially saying, "treat all those around you as you would your own flesh and blood". In other words, treat everyone the way you would want **your** family, your loved ones, to be treated.

Hare, sums this up well in his commentary when he writes: “Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we consider all that God has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that [the bible] demands of us but rather stubborn, unwavering commitment. Similarly, to love our neighbor, including our enemies, does not mean that we must feel affection for them. To love the neighbor is to imitate God by taking their needs seriously.” [*Matthew*, Interpretation Commentaries p. 260]

So I think the real question we need to ask ourselves is not ‘do you love God’ but “**how** are you loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind? And what are you *doing* to *show* love to your neighbour?” How do people know and *experience* your love for them? It’s easy to *talk* about ‘love’ and compassion and justice, or to complain about how skewed the priorities of the world are. But the trouble with

words is that they don't generally cost us anything. It's really only when we're willing to allow the pain of others to touch us and *change* us **and our actions** in some way, that they *know* we love them. It's really only when we're willing to give up some of our own comfort and desires and priorities and resources to support the needs and priorities of the *other* that we are living a life of love. In the words of Desmond Tutu "We must be more than our brother's keepers...we must be our brother's brother"

That is the cost of love. To be willing to let love of God and neighbour change our lives, change our priorities, change our actions, change what we spend our money on. Because it's in our everyday actions that we show, or *fail* to show, love. Love calls us to be more aware of others, more generous with our time, our money, our voice, our priorities. Love is not a big once-in-a-lifetime event. The love that Jesus calls us to is found in *every* action of our lives. As Mother Teresa has said "If you can't do great things, do small things with great love."

And just who is it that we are to enter into this costly love for? As Jesus reminds us elsewhere, our neighbour is *everyone* who shares this planet with us. We don't get to pick who we consider to be our neighbours based on quality of life, on intelligence or beauty, on moral development or religion, on color or sexuality or geography. We are **all** neighbours to one another. Because God loves *everyone* – even those we think *are* – or **should** be – unlovable. In simple terms loving our neighbour is treating every person as if we really **believe** they are a beloved brother or sister in Christ. And it also means bringing our voice, our political power and our financial resources to work towards a world where everyone really does get the same *fair chance* to live a life of dignity and worth.

When looking at a hard commandment like today's it's easy to feel that we can't possibly be that good so there's no real point in trying. So it's important to remember that our ability to live a life of love will always fall far short of perfection. We'll never 'master' the commandment to 'love one another' and we shouldn't beat ourselves up for being human. But the fact that we'll never 'arrive' doesn't give us license to stop *trying*. God is always calling us forward, stretching us, pulling us from our comfort zone so we **can** be more than we *think* we can be. And the good news is we're never alone in our attempts to live out of a motivation of love. We are in it with each other and we're in it with God. God takes all our efforts to be loving - as imperfect and fragmented as they are - and incorporates them into God's own love for the world. Because love is the essence of God, and so it's the heart of our relationship with God.

We **all** struggle to live out this commandment to love God with all we are and all we have and to love our neighbour as our self. But when we *try*, sometimes even to our own surprise, our emotions can follow suit and we actually do **feel** affection for someone we thought unlovable. Or we move from thinking about God as a distant idea, into having a warm relationship of love and connection. But the *emotion* is not commanded. Only the **action** of love is commanded. In Christ, we can **act** with love even when we *don't* feel like it. And so, part of the role of a community of faith such as St. Anne's is to support each other with patience and encouragement as we work towards living into God's calling. We gather as a community so that we can move **together** into a life lived in God's great, mysterious, presence of love.

'Giving our all' for love takes a *lifetime* of practice and commitment and discipline. It takes a discerning heart to know what really matters in life, but even

more than that, it takes a discerning **life** to truly **want** to be part of what really matters. Because it goes against everything our *ego* tells us we *should* want. Jesus' answer to the question about the law is so simple, familiar and orthodox, and yet the practicalities of living it out are the work of a *lifetime*. So I invite you to work on loving God and neighbour one tiny step at a time.