

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity  
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St. Matthew's Church  
10 September 2006

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“Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (BCP 69)

At each Eucharist, either this Summary of the Law or the Ten Commandments is proclaimed. The first four commandments are directed toward God and the last six toward our family or neighbor. Both were well known to the Jewish lawyer questioning Jesus some 2000 years ago. They direct our attention toward two distinct aspects of life - the vertical relationship we have with Our Father, who art in heaven, and the horizontal relationship experienced with our family and neighbors, here on earth.

In his epistle, St. John reminds us (1 John 4:19) that, “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”

The lawyer in today's Gospel was focused on the admonition from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy that has been incorporated into every Jewish Liturgy. Simply put, we are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. This love is all encompassing and demands everything. But how can one honestly measure the daily level of *total* compliance in a *living* relationship? Is it ten percent, fifty or seventy-five percent or perhaps “ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths percent pure?”

With an intellectual slight of hand, we can assuage our conscience that we have fulfilled the demands of a relationship by keeping “the rules.” Rules are fixed and certain. With a little practice, we become proficient at dotting every “i” and crossing every “t”. Rules give us a specific list of tasks to be accomplished rather than the open-ended “being there” and available that a vibrant living relationship requires. It is often easier to “do” something than to “be” something. Rabbinic Judaism had created fixed rules of observance where boundaries and relationships were well defined. Little provision was made for the inconvenient and unexpected. This rigidity inadvertently became a stumbling block to recognizing other people in need. Task triumphs over relationship in this static environment.

The lawyer speaking with Jesus was seeking to justify himself. He had the “God” portion of the equation in a carefully crafted box and was anxious to compartmentalize the neighbor component as well. Jesus does not give him an easy answer. In classic Rabbinic fashion, Jesus answers the question with a question and tells a story of men on a journey. Early Church theologians likened this excursion on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem to our own spiritual journey from this world to the heavenly city.

Having set the scene of the story, Jesus introduces the principle characters. The first two, a priest and a Levite, pass by on either side of a fallen traveler. They are not particularly evil people – just preoccupied with other matters. If asked, both could no doubt justify their seemingly cold detachment.

We know from Scripture that there were more priests and Levites in Israel than could serve at the Temple in Jerusalem. A priest or Levite would have to win a lottery to be chosen to serve in the Temple. For many, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Once selected, the priests and Levites would then carefully prepare themselves spiritually and physically for service as their scheduled time drew near.

Jewish Law (Lev. 21:11) mandates that physical contact with the dead makes a priest temporarily unclean and ineligible to minister in the Temple. If the priest and Levite attended to the victim and found the victim to be dead instead of wounded, they might never have another opportunity to serve in the Temple. Both placed the task of their service to God above their relationship to man. As they journeyed to serve Him, God placed directly in their path an opportunity to show mercy, compassion and charity to their neighbor. How can one decide between two goods?

The Samaritan in this story crafted by Jesus serves several purposes. The Samaritans were descendents of Jews who had inter-married with the Assyrians. They were despised by the Jews. The Jews had no official dealings with Samaritans according to St. John's Gospel (4:9) but perhaps, there was a certain amount of trade between them, as the story might suggest. In social inter-action, the Jews and Samaritans would pass one another as ships in the night. Placing a Samaritan in a favorable light at the expense of priests and Levites was intended to make the lawyer uncomfortable and question his carefully constructed worldview.

An early purpose of main roads was to connect cities - centers of commerce. They also attracted thieves who would prey upon travelers and hijack their goods. Without the distraction of cell phones, talk radio, diamond lanes, and the like, the Samaritan in our story noticed the victim of the "drive-by" attack and had compassion upon him. He went to him, bound up his wounds, set him on his own beast, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The Samaritan could be described as a frequent traveler, a road-warrior on the Jericho to Jerusalem corridor, well-known to the innkeeper. The Samaritan probably had a busy schedule and a long "to-do" list. When he encountered a relationship issue, the Samaritan modified his agenda and gave the person in need primacy over the task at hand. Jesus forces us to struggle with the question - what is more important, task or relationship? When both choices are good, which is to take priority?

Many of us are task driven in our daily lives. It gives us a sense of accomplishment when we complete each item on our "to-do" list. Interruptions or distractions not listed in our day-timer or Palm Pilot are unwelcome. They intrude upon our organized day and become a source of stress. They threaten our sense of order and purpose. Perhaps, this is precisely why God places them before us.

Many times, I have stubbornly ignored human need and relationships while ruthlessly attending to an inflexible schedule. With great regularity, God has allowed unforeseen circumstances to turn the joy of a planned accomplishment into something with a sour taste. Each time that I have modified my agenda to give primacy to a relationship issue, God's provision has never failed.

Rules give order and consistency. When God allows us to see human need right before our eyes, He does not want us to turn our eyes away. He expects us to respond with generosity and compassion, even when it is inconvenient.

May God extend his grace and wisdom to us - to love both God and our neighbor.

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