

Love God ... and ... Love Your Neighbor!
Matthew 22:34-40 October 26, 2008

There's a Jewish story about a Mr. Kleinman. Kleinman was in an unfamiliar town on the Sabbath. He went to the local synagogue for services and there met a Mr. Putterman who invited him to be his guest for the evening in his home.

They went to Putterman's home where Kleinman took a beautiful hot bath with scented soap and dried himself with fluffy towels. They enjoyed a delicious meal. Afterwards, Mr. Kleinman spent the night sleeping on a really comfortable bed with fresh sheets. Basically, Mr. Kleinman was treated like royalty by Mr. Putterman.

The next morning as Mr. Kleinman was leaving he said: "This was a delightful Sabbath. Thank you so much. What can I do to repay you?"

With that, Mr. Putterman presented Kleinman with a piece of paper on which was written: "Warm bath – six dollars; two cakes of soap – four dollars; clean towels – three dollars; full dinner – twenty dollars; overnight lodging – forty dollars; fresh sheets – three dollars; Total: Seventy-six dollars."

Kleinman was shocked. "You're charging me?"

Putterman replied: "Certainly."

"But you invited me! I was your guest! I've never heard of such a thing! This is outrageous!" Kleinman protested.

Putterman said, "Nevertheless, if you could just settle up."

Kleinman responded, "I will do no such thing!"

"Alright," sighed Mr. Putterman. "Let's not argue. Let's take this case to the rabbi and let him decide."

"That suits me fine," said Kleinman and off they went to the local rabbi.

In the Rabbi's study Kleinman laid out his case. The rabbi listened and stroked his beard. When Kleinman finished, he asked Putterman, "Do you have anything to add?"

Putterman replied, "No, it happened just the way Mr. Kleinman described."

The rabbi then said, "Very well. In that case, based on numerous Talmudic precedents and on similar cases found in the Repeal, it is my decision that Mr. Kleinman should pay Mr. Putterman."

Kleinman of course was dumbfounded. Still a rabbi had heard his case. A rabbi had considered and a rabbi had reached a decision. The two men thanked the rabbi and left.

Once outside, Mr. Kleinman began to count his money. "What are you doing?" asked Putterman.

“I’m going to pay you,” said Kleinman.

“Don’t be foolish,” said Putterman. “You were my guest. I was honored to have you spend the Sabbath with me. I hope you’ll come again.”

“But you gave me a bill. We had a dispute, a decision was rendered,” said the confused Kleinman.

“Oh, that!” said Putterman. “I just wanted to see what kind of schmuck we have for a rabbi.”¹

The lawyer who approached Jesus in the temple that day and asked for his opinion on the greatest law really wasn’t looking for new insight into what made Jesus tick. He wanted to show Jesus up as a schmuck – as a fraud. He was trying to trap him into saying something that would turn those who were flocking to him against him. Once again the religious of that day failed. Jesus’ response was right on and everyone in the temple that day knew it.

“What of all that is written in the Old Testament – the teachings of Moses and the Prophets – the works of at least 30 authors, describing events which occurred during over 2000 years of history – books of a variety of literature styles: history, poetry, songs, prophecy, wisdom, story form – what of it all is most important, Jesus?”

Jesus didn’t even pause to think about it. It was so clear in his being that the expressing of it was already formulated in his mind before the lawyer even asked for it. And so, he easily proclaimed. “First, love God with all of your heart, mind and soul. And there’s a second one very closely associated with it, love your neighbor as yourself. All of the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Of course, Jesus was quoting some very familiar verses to those raised in the Jewish faith. They are the words of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, known as the “shema” and memorized by every Jewish child as early as they are able to memorize.

What if a visitor approached you after the service today and said something to you like: “You know, I used to go to church a lot when I was a kid, but I’ve been out of the church for a long time now. It just didn’t seem that important to me, I guess. I couldn’t fit it into my busy schedule. But now I want to come back. I feel like something is missing in my life, and I think I know what it is. So I’ve been visiting around at some of the local churches, trying to find out where I fit in. I wonder if you could tell me what would be expected of me if I joined Maple Grove?”

Now, remember the person has just experienced an hour worship service. They’ve already seen and heard me. It’s not me they want to hear anything more from. They want to hear something from someone in the pews. They want to know from someone who won’t take forever to provide an answer. What would you say in a matter of a minute or two?

Now, I would hope that at least two things would come into your mind. One being our mission – that we are an open community of Christians who love God and serve our neighbors (which grows precisely out of Jesus’ response to the lawyer). The second thing I would hope you would mention is our emphasis on the concept that all members are ministers – our Every Member in Ministry model of organizing ourselves to carry out our ministry – our inviting persons to choose where we believe we can best be in service – in ministry.

There's a similarity between the question I've phrased from the lips of the hypothetical stranger and that which the lawyer asked Jesus in the temple that day. "What if I wanted to be a follower of yours, Jesus? What would be expected of me? What is most important for those of us who say yes to following you, Jesus?" "What should be central to our lives – central to how we should live out the faith?"

"Love God and love your neighbor," that was his response and it is still his response to us today. "Love God with every aspect of who you are – with all your body, with all your mind, and with all your soul. And, love your neighbor as you love yourself. Yes, I said 'as you love yourself' so you better get that right in your head as well. You should love yourself because God made you and God don't make any junk." (There's just so much more that could be - needs to be - said in this regard. But that's all I'm going to say today - love yourself.)

The love Jesus has in mind here is more than a doctrine. It's more than words. It's more than a feeling. "(It's) a sacrifice, obedience, partnership, turning the other cheek. We may sing 'I love to tell the story of unseen things above,' but what the world is looking for is not words or melodies, but love, love that manifest itself in the way we spend our money, the way we vote, the way we treat those who don't deserve our love, those whose skin color or beliefs are different than ours. 'Mother, father, sister, brother, everybody sing and shout, cause that's what it's all about. It's about love.'"²

In another place Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for another person." In John's letter it's put this way: "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. If we love one another, God lives in us and God's love is perfected in us. God is love. Those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them."

"In the end, the bottom line is: God wants us to love one another. It's God's commandment to us. Love sums up all the commandments. It has authority behind it. It's not an option. It's not a theory, an idea, a philosophy to bounce around. It's not a question or suggestion as one possible route you may take. It's a command. This is my commandment that you love one another. It is the 'law,' that the psalmist meditates on day and night (Psalm 1)."³ The Word of God became flesh. In Jesus' life we see love as a binding, relationship, a caring, a willingness to sacrifice, to lay down one's life, to enter into the other person's situation.⁴ We who choose to be his followers agree to follow in his footsteps.

One winter, a woman was walking down the main street of Birmingham, Alabama. She was shopping for Christmas presents. She happened upon a small boy – she estimated about seven-years-old. He wasn't dressed very warm - barefooted - standing over a heater vent in the sidewalk to keep warm. He had a bundle of newspapers under his arm that he was trying to sell to those who walked by.

The woman went up to him and she said, "Son, where are your shoes and socks?"

He said, "Lady, I ain't got none."

She then invited him to go with her into one of the nearby department stores and there she purchased for him a pair of socks and a heavy pair of shoes.

The young lad skipped away and out of the store without so much of a thank you. Suddenly he reappeared and he asked, “Lady, are you God?”

“No, son,” she said, “I’m not God. But I am one of his children.”

The little guy turned to leave again while saying, “I knowed you must be some kin to him.”⁵ It’s about love, folks, love.

Alice Trowbridge is an associate pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. In a sermon of hers this past fall she told the inside story of a tragedy that was on the national news after the flooding in the mid-west last summer. The tragedy that she referenced in the sermon happened in Chesterton, Indiana.

A ten-year-old boy named Doug and a couple of his friends were dipping their toes in the creek following the torrential rains that caused the flooding. Doug was sucked into the raging river. Doug’s neighbors were home and saw what happened. While most people along the river were screaming, Mark Thanos, one of Doug’s neighbors and a high school English teacher, jumped into the water to try and save the boy.

Mark wasn’t particularly a very good swimmer and began to struggle. Mark’s seventy-four-year-old father, John, jumped into the water to try and help his son. Father and son both drowned.

Ten-year-old Doug survived. Later that day as he clung to his mother he was heard to keep crying, “I wish he knew I could swim ... I wish he didn’t love me that much.”

It was love of course that drove son and father into that water to save a neighbor – a force greater than any force in the universe.

There’s more to the story though as Alice related it to her congregation. In the Chicago Tribune on September 16 & 17 two reporters by the names of Stacy St. Clair and John Kass told the “rest of the story.” Tragedy had not the final word.

“The day after John and Mark Thanos, father and son, drowned in that churning creek, the young Doug and his family visited the newly widowed Victoria Thanos and her own sons. Ten-year-old Doug had made Victoria a home-made cake. Victoria hugged the neighbor boy tightly. She asked if he was feeling better, and she made a fuss over his cake. She then invited Doug and his family to sit down and have something to eat with her boys.

“So they did. And Victoria began to tell stories. Stories about her husband, her own sons, and their grandfather. And as they broke bread together, the gravity of grief gave way to the grace of love.

“By the way, to this day Victoria tells her friends that if they are praying for anyone, they are to pray for that little boy Doug.”⁶

“Uh, Jesus. Uh, Jesus, which is the greatest of all the laws?”

“First, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And, closely related to it – inseparable actually – is a second commandment: love your neighbor as yourself.”

And the love Jesus had in mind when he summarized all of the teachings in the law and the prophets was not that sort of vague understanding we've made it out to be in our society. It was not philio love – the love we enjoy with our friends. It was not eros love – the love known as erotica. It was agape love - that which has no dependency on wanting or even expecting something from the other. Jesus pretty much redefined it by modeling it, embodying it. He loved by commanding that it involves such things as turning the other cheek, going the second mile when commanded by an enemy to go one mile, forgiving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us, giving without expecting anything in return.

As a result of Jesus' life, death and resurrection we who are his followers understand that it's not simply about believing "in love." It's believing that love is defined as suffering, sacrificing, nonviolently acting. You know, like we saw him do on the cross.

It's like that slogan that was on a tee-shirt a few years back. "I asked Jesus, 'how much do you love me?' And he spread out his arms wide on the cross, and he died." Let us pray.

Invitation to Christian Discipleship

1. The Jewish Humor List. 5. pp. 140-141 as quoted in King Duncan's "Insincere Religion," Collected Sermons, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.
2. George S. Johnson, "What Does It Mean to Love?" Critical Decisions in Following Jesus (Lima: C.S.S. Publishing Company, 1992), 1-55673-427-1.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Stephen M. Crotts/George L. Murphy/Stan Purdum, "How to Love God," Sermons For Sundays: After Pentecost (Last Third): Rendering to God (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 0788023233e.
6. Leonard Sweet, "The 2 Love Laws," Leonard Sweet Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2008), 0-000-1415.