



Taking the Great Commandment Literally

Mark 12:28-34

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Over the course of the month, we are looking more intentionally at the Great Commandment, offered by Jesus to the temple leaders, which offers that of all the rules, laws, commands, and requirements for faithful living, the greatest and foremost is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

There is a primacy on the love of God – if one doesn't love God, why should they even bother keeping any other commands? But, along with our love for God, there is a coupled command – one that doesn't stand apart, but that is offered in conjunction – that we are to love one another.

This double-sided command is not optional for faithful living, it is foundational. St. Augustine, a Christian theologian of the fourth century, lifted up the importance of such a dual command, saying, "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he [or she] understands the divine Scriptures, or any part of them, so that it does not build up this twofold love of God and of our neighbor, does not understand them at all."ⁱ Karl Barth, another well known theologian of the early 20th Century, added, "Love is the essence of Christian living. It is also its *conditio sine qua non*, in ever conceivable connection." Which means, it is the indispensable condition of Christian living. Barth adds, "Wherever the Christian life in commission or omission is good before God, the good thing about it is love."ⁱⁱ

Last week, as we began this focus on Loving Thy Neighbor, I said we're going to start by removing the obstacles from our conversation that keep us from putting this into practice. Too often, we ask the questions, "Is this person my neighbor?" By asking the question, we give ourselves an out – as if, if the person doesn't qualify as my neighbor, I can withhold love from them. Instead of debating *who* is your neighbor, we're focusing on our literal neighbors. For the purpose of practice, we're taking a narrow focus on the people who live most closely to you. Here's our chart – you and your eight closest neighbors – be they people who live across the hall, next door, behind you, or who share the adjacent condo or tent. We began last week by saying that to love our neighbor, it begins by getting to know their name. A simple place to start.

The second debate that often comes up when it comes to loving our neighbors is, what is love? What does it mean to *love* our neighbor? From a foundational place, if you want to learn about the transformative power of love, just google Bishop Michael Curry's sermon from yesterday's Royal Wedding. From the foundational texts of 1 Corinthians 13, to 1 John 4, to quoting an old medieval poem, Bishop Curry emphasizes the point, "Where true love is found, God himself is there."

So, shy of re-preaching some of his sermon this morning, I think one of the most beneficial ways to learn what loving one's neighbor looks like is to see it in practice. I don't think I need to exposit for you what love looks like – but perhaps instead to remind you by sharing from real life witnesses to such loving of one's neighbor. Admittedly, these are hard stories to find. These are not the stories one finds easily by going to Google. For all that I can usually find quickly on Google, these stories are not readily available. And it's not because they don't exist. It's because the news – the stories we like to share for the world to know – they are the stories of extravagance. The world like's eye-catching and big impacting stories. The stories I'm sharing are not extravagant in *that* way – though, I find them extravagant none-the-less. These are not stories of non-profits or wealthy benefactors stepping in to send someone to Disney world. These are not “Make-a-Wish” stories. These are stories of local neighbors, doing what Christ has called us to do – loving their neighbors.

- I heard a story of a man named Jimmy and his wife Karen out of Albuquerque, NM. Jimmy and Karen each had pretty significant health problems – Karen had dealt with Type 1 diabetes her entire life, and as she aged, her health worsened. Jimmy himself was diagnosed with Stage 4 prostate cancer. One day, as they were sitting in their home, Jimmy says he heard a lawn mower in the front yard. He looked out the window, and his neighbor of 20 years, a man by the name of Fernando, was mowing and weed eating the lawn. Shortly after Fernando starting helping with the yard, Karen passed away. So, Fernando introduced Jimmy into a support group for grieving spouses at his church. Fernando continued to help take care of the property while Jimmy battled cancer.
- One our church members shared with me a story of her brother-in-law, Pat, and his neighbors. One of the neighbors, Jim, had been in a diving accident, which left him a paraplegic. Jim's wife was not strong enough to help him get in and out of bed at home, so Pat and a number of others in the neighborhood formed a crew to take turns going to help Jim out of bed each morning, and help him back into bed each evening.
- A local neighborhood lost power during one of the heavier snows in recent years. Their street was without power for over 3 days. A few neighbors on side of the street had generators up and cranking. When it became apparent that the power wasn't going to be turned back on quickly, given the freezing temperatures and the snow still falling, a few of the neighbors ran extension cords across the street to provide power for their neighbors to run space heaters and lights.
- Another snow story – two years back when we had our snowmagedon that dumped over 30” of snow in just 24 hours, a good friend of Jen and mine was in Disney with her family. Having grown up in the north, and having experienced many heavy snows, she had always kept a snow blower in her garage. While in Disney, knowing what we were experiencing here in Northern Virginia, she called one of her neighbors, gave them instructions on how to get into the garage, and she gave the neighbor permission to use the snow blower so they could clear out their driveway. When she returned from Disney just a couple days later, she

found that the neighbor had used the snow blower to clear off not only their own driveway, but they had cleared every driveway on the block.

- One of the mom's at our boy's preschool told me that when her and her husband moved into their current home, they were pregnant with their first child. The family next door already had a few children. As they got to know the neighbors in those early months, the woman next door started bringing over baby supplies, and offering support for this woman who was preparing to give birth to her first child. After the baby was born, the neighbor continued to show support by offering parenting tips on how to ensure mother and baby were well cared for.
- Another baby story: Jen and I received an email earlier this year from someone in our neighborhood about a young couple who had just welcomed home their first child. The neighbor, who lived just next door to the young couple, set-up a meal train to provide dinner for the couple. They reached out to their friends in the area and others in the neighborhood, inviting people to provide food for this family who was trying to acclimate to having an infant at home.
- I also read a story about a group of farmers in Illinois. In preparation for the harvest time, one of the farmers in this community had fallen off a grain truck and been injured, such that he was unable to tend to the farm. With the weather patterns of the year, it became imperative to harvest the crops, or they could have been lost. Yet, the man was not physically able to do the work himself. So, 18 other farmers nearby brought their combines and grain trucks, and together, they harvested the man's 320 acres for him.

I'm sure that if I asked you here today, you'd have some similar stories you could tell. The reality is, there are many stories of neighbors loving on their neighbors in these ways.

As I was reflecting on these stories myself, I found a common thread. From lawn care, to child care, to farming help and snow blowing, did you catch the foundation that each of these stories share? The circumstances and the type of love that is shared is different in each story, but they all have a common core.

You can't love on the people around you if you don't know them and know what they're going through.

Each of these stories, while powerful for how it demonstrates the love of neighbor, begins with neighbors who knew what was going on in the lives of the people around them. Fernando knew that Jimmy's lawn needed to be mowed because he knew of the medical problems the family was experiencing. Pat and his neighbors knew that Jim and his wife needed help getting him in and out of bed because they knew about his accident. The woman with the snow blower – while on vacation in Disney – was so well connected with her neighbors that she not only knew how bad the snow was at home, but she knew that no one else in the neighborhood had a snow blower to use. With the baby stories, the neighbors knew of the coming child, and knew

that the families needed some additional support in that time of transition. The farmers knew of their neighbor's injury, and they came together to accomplish a task no one of them could have accomplished on their own.

To love your neighbor, you have to know them. It starts with something simple, like we looked at last week, like getting to know their name; but knowing their name is just the first step. To really love on someone, to really love your neighbor as yourself, you've got to get to know the people around you.

Friends, this kind of love, this love which requires knowledge of the other, it is the very love of which Christ speaks, for it is the love of God.

That's the awesome thing about Christ's naming and inviting us to love one another. The love we are invited to share with others is the very same love that God offers to us. For every example of a neighbor loving on a neighbor that I can share, I can share just as many stories of God loving on humanity.

When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness and were famished, what did God do? God rained down manna from heaven. ... When Noah and the animals were sick at sea on the flooded earth, what did God do? God brought forth dry land. ... When Christ came upon the blind man, he gave him sight; when he found the leper, he cleansed his spots; when the lame man was lowered into his presence, he called him to stand up; when Lazarus lie dead before him, Christ gave him life. ... When humanity was stricken to death by sin, God knew that our only hope was the gift of the Son, and so Christ was called to the cross that we may have eternal healing.

"God invites us to love the way he loves. He challenges us to put our love into action."ⁱⁱⁱ This isn't a metaphorical invitation for us to share a metaphorical love with our metaphorical neighbors – it's a call to love as God loves on the people who surround us.

This is a powerful love – life changing love – world changing love. One can argue whether or not such love is a realistic expectation for all the world before Christ comes in final victory, but as even such small glimpses share in God's work, I find Bishop Curry's words worth offering:

"This love, this is the way of Jesus. And it's game changer.
Imagine our homes and families when this way of love is the way.
Imagine our neighborhoods and communities when [this] love is the way.
Imagine our governments and countries when [this] love is the way.
Imagine business and commerce when this love is the way.
Imagine our world when [this] love is the way.
No child would go to bed hungry in such a world as that.
Poverty would become history in such a world as that.
The earth would be as a sanctuary in such a world as that.
We would treat one another as children of God, regardless of [our] differences."

This love can make a difference if we but start loving one another – so how do we get there?

Well look, it's Pentecost Sunday – that's why we have the red surrounding us, signaling the fiery presence of the Spirit – so I would be remiss if I didn't call our attention to palpable presence of the Spirit in this call to love our neighbors. So, just one more minute and then I'm through.

In Acts, chapter 2, we read about the receiving of the Holy Spirit by the first Christians. The text proclaims, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each."

I think too often, we think we have to be miracle workers who conjure up miraculous events so that others may know the love of God. But the scripture doesn't call us to be miracle workers – the text tells us there is a miracle worker, who is present in our lives, present in our actions, even present in the words we speak. When the Spirit came and swept over the believers, they did not have to plan out or write a SWOT analysis on how to share the good news of God with those around them. The reality is, those who believed were filled with the Spirit, and all they had to do was speak up, and through them just showing up, the presence, strength, power, and voice of God was heard by those around them.

If you want to love on your neighbor, you don't have to do extravagant things and you don't have to try and be someone you're not. God has so gifted you with the presence of the Spirit, that sometimes the best thing to do to share the love of God with others – the best thing to do to love your neighbor – is just to be there, and trust that in your voice, in your words, in your showing up, God will be made manifest. And where God is, there too is love, for God *is* love.

So go, empowered and filled with the Spirit, trusting and knowing that through you, Christ is made known as you share in the lives of those around you.

ⁱ Lincoln E. Galloway. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon. *The Art of Neighboring*. Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2012.