

Proper 25-A  
October 29, 2017  
St. John's Cathedral

When I was about 8 years old, my parents were sued by our next-door neighbors. It was a fairly trivial matter that had to do with a community water system, but the neighbors were very unpleasant and even placed a mocking sign on the highway by our driveway after they won their case. Their son, who was about my age, was well-known as a bully and delighted in knocking kids off their bikes. In short, they were hard to like.

When I first heard Jesus' commandment to love your neighbor as yourself ( a commandment we also heard in the reading from Leviticus) I was about that same age. And with a somewhat literal interpretation of who my neighbor was, I reasoned that this would be just about impossible for me. We seemed to have the most unlovable neighbors on the planet.

Eventually the issue with our neighbors sorted itself out, but that earlier memory with all of its pain and hurt and humiliation stuck in my mind for a long time. How do we love a neighbor who seems unlovable? How do we love a neighbor that we don't even know? How do we overcome some of those barriers of conflict, culture, custom, unfamiliarity, ethnicity and any number other factors that for some stand in the way? Those are good question at any age.

Of course a lot of it has to do with how we think about neighbor and how we think about love. The neighbor in both of these scripture passages isn't just the people next door- or even down the street. The neighbor is pretty much everyone.

Everyone who comes into our life – pleasant or unpleasant. And love is far more than affection. It is something that is much deeper and wider. In this Matthew passage it comes from the root *agape*, which is the self-giving love with which God loves us. It has little or nothing to do with how much we like someone.

This teaching about love and neighbor comes into our worship lives all the time. These words work their way into our souls. If you are a regular attender at our 8 o'clock Sunday service on Sunday where we celebrate with Rite I, you hear this every Sunday: "Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith: Thou shalt love the lord your 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."

The language might sound a bit archaic, but the words ring true in any generation.

When we are baptized – and whenever we witness a baptism, we promise that we will seek and serve Christ in all persons and love our neighbors as ourselves. All persons. It can be a daunting promise to live into, but it is a good one to keep before us as we navigate through life. The love of neighbor is at our very core. It is not an optional exercise. We love those with whom we disagree, those who annoy us, the bullies who push us off of our bikes, and, of course, those who are easy for us to love.

Perhaps that sounds impossible. But it also sounds hopeful. Bishop Rehberg reminded us last weekend at our diocesan convention that it is possible to love even

the most difficult neighbor because it really is God doing the loving, not ourselves. God loves us deeply (as God loves everyone). God dwells within us, and empowers us to love those we encounter in this world.

Sometimes we come to that realization in dramatic ways. In 1958 the monk and mystic Thomas Merton was moving through an ordinary day, doing errands, going about ordinary things . And then something changed. He wrote, *"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. ... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."*

Most of the time we don't have such dramatic insights, but we are still called to love in ways we might not have imagined. Ronald Rolheiser, a favorite theologian of mine, frames this in terms of mercy. Mercy, he says, lies deepest in God's heart – God's essence. And mercy is the essence of all true religions. Our practice, for instance, of reaching out to the poor and powerless is an extension of God's love and not just our effort. All of us are in need of God's mercy, he says, but we are also called to extend the same mercy to others .

I've always admired the spirit of the Hindu greeting Namaste. Roughly translated, it means "I bow to the divine in you," or "I honor the divine in you." In other words, it is a greeting that recognizes the stranger as one who is really

neighbor – the one God loves. Framed in our tradition and in the words of the baptismal covenant, when we promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, we are honoring the divine in them, as well as acknowledging our common humanity.

This isn't just a theoretical thing, it is love in action. And opportunities abound in the most ordinary places of our lives. One chilly morning this past week I looked out the window and saw a man sitting outside the welcome center with his head on the table and his backpack and another bag on the patio. That's not an uncommon sight here, but it's incredibly easy to walk past someone who appears to be sleeping, even on a cold morning. But one of our parishioners invited him into the welcome center, got him a cup of coffee and spent time in conversation with him. Those were two simple gestures, but they were an effort to love a neighbor who was a stranger. A neighbor who needed a time and place of sanctuary on a cold morning and at a difficult point in his life. It was a small, but very significant gesture of love.

Loving the neighbor stretches us. Henri Nouwen, the great writer on spirituality, said most of us have at least a little fear of strangers. When we welcome someone as neighbor, it is like converting hostility into hospitality because it overcomes that fear of the stranger. It invites us to respect and embrace the stranger, to offer a level of hospitality that goes beyond the cup of coffee and recognizes that in many ways we live and walk on common ground.

I hope that many of you have received and read the material sent out last week by our stewardship committee that invites us to be bearers of the light of

Christ as we go about our lives. A significant part of bearing the light of Christ is loving and reaching out to the neighbor – the neighbor in need, the neighbor in pain, the neighbor who needs a listening ear or a word of encouragement, the neighbor who needs to be in our prayers or invited to join us in our common prayer together. The neighbor who God calls and empowers us to love. A lot of that Christ light gets shared through the ministries of the Cathedral and its members and the support that we offer in the wider community. I hope you will consider this as you prayerfully consider your giving this year.

My childhood next-door neighbors, I admit, were a challenging family – a challenge I have remembered for many years, but also one that has helped me ponder how to love that much larger and more diverse group of neighbors I encounter day-to-day. A wise spiritual director once helped me with that question of how we love a neighbor who seems difficult to love.

“Just look at them through God’s eyes,” she said.

May it be so.