

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It's telling how often the new testament and gospels speak of law, and how often the answer to that question of law boils down to one simple refrain: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Love your neighbor as yourself, love your neighbor as yourself, love your neighbor as yourself, has been continually, constantly drilled into us. You hear it in the lessons. You hear it expanded upon in sermons. You hear it in the music, you see it in action in the liturgy when we exchange the peace, love your neighbor as yourself is a foundational aspect of our faith because it is the distillation of what God wants of creation. In the beginning God gave us dominion over all of creation, and that proved to be too much to handle without giving into temptation to have more. The Israelites couldn't handle the wandering in the wilderness without erecting a golden calf, so God gave Moses to give to them the 10 commandments to follow, and we still didn't get it. Jesus comes to us, God's new and final covenant with creation, and drills the message down to one specific way of interaction, Love your neighbor as yourself. It's simple. It's succinct. And we still have the hardest time figuring it out.

Why do we struggle so much with this? Paul writes of love quite clearly today, "love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Do no wrong to a neighbor. Treat your neighbor as if they are one in the same as yourself. Afford them every opportunity. Live into love with them. And, if you do, the law can't help but be fulfilled for love is law.

But, we continue to fail at this minimum threshold. Is the reason we experience so much conflict with each other, why we enact public policy that harms rather than helps, that

threatens, instills fear, causes those who are already in danger, in fear, to go deeper into that place of darkness, because none of us has love for ourselves? For if we don't have love for ourselves then we cannot by definition offer love to our neighbor because we don't have that understanding of love to give. Is this why there is so much hate in the world? Is this why there is so much fear in the world?

I do not think this is the source of our problems. In fact, I think the source of our problems is quite the opposite. I think we all have far too much love for ourselves. We focus on celebrating ourselves, our accomplishments, our sense of self, so much that we don't have the time, let alone the ability, to look beyond ourselves and see our neighbor. To see that person who needs us to reach out. To see that friend, that family member, and especially (perhaps most importantly) that stranger, whose life would be forever impacted if we simply showed them a sliver of the love that we focus on ourselves. Part of this comes down to understanding what it means to love, both ourselves and our neighbor. That the complete self-indulgent love is not actually love in practice but sin and pride elevating us above all others. And that, if love is the fulfillment of the law, that interacting with one another, caring for one another, to the point that we are willing to speak with them, to confront them, to express our concerns to them, is the love we are called into. This is love that celebrates in our ability to be with one another and trust that we can address each other, trust that we will be heard by the other, and trust that the community will support us in this attempt to be open and honest with one another.

Coming face-to-face with someone in order to express, purely out of a place of love and concern for the other, viable reactions to sins committed or even simply perceived against

yourself, is really hard to do. Part of our cultural assumptions are that we are not to be honest about our feelings with one another. For some this manifests as a complete internalizing of those feelings. For others this manifests as “honesty,” where they “speak their minds,” but ultimately do not care how that impacts their neighbor because they’re “just being honest.” Either way, this is not what we’re called to do.

I want to give an example to try and illuminate this more clearly. Not all of my sermons have been good. In particular, I have definitely had a more political sermon (or two) that have struck some in the congregation as an attack on their person, their ideology. It has never been my intention to ostracize or call out people as a way of condemning. But, that has not always been as clear as it could have been. I apologize for that. But, I also only know that there is more than one person here who doesn’t always agree with me because others have spoken to me about conversations they’ve had. I know for sure there is one person who doesn’t, because that person is always willing to share feedback, to challenge my conclusions, and do so out of a place of love for me as their neighbor. This is feedback that I cherish. It is hard for me to know if my intentions are actually made clear, if no one ever offers any feedback. In not offering feedback you are not showing love to me, your neighbor, nor do I have the opportunity to show that love back to you in acknowledging hurt and pain I may have caused you. When we don’t show love to each other, we are not fulfilling the law.

This is where Jesus’ message today is made clear. Even if one is not willing to listen to you one-on-one, involve others who know you, and if they still won’t listen, involve the whole church, and if they still won’t listen treat them as gentiles and tax collectors (which if you look at the history of Jesus’ ministry, there’s a pretty clear understanding of how they’re treated:

with love). So, even if someone refuses to respond to the love you are trying to show by coming to them as a neighbor, by stating the sin that has been committed, by trying to live into that role of neighbor with another, you still love them for that is the fulfillment of the law.

This is as good a time as any to echo Paul: WAKE UP!

This world, our society, the predominant culture of our time, has lulled us into a false sense of comfort and security. We sleepwalk through this world in a bubble of our own devising. We're continually protected from each other. We're continually sure of the fact, continually assured of the fact, that we're right and others are wrong. We're continually assured of our Christian identity, so much so that we forget that we actually have to live into that identity the way Christ laid it out. We come to church and are assured of our eternal salvation, we are assured that God forgives us, but are we really if we refuse to live into the fulfillment of the law in response to these assurances?

We are those who still refuse even after the one we have sinned against has come to us, brought others into the conversation, brought our sin before the whole church. Just look around at the world today if you think we aren't those who refuse. The "us vs. them" mentality that continually pits us against each other on every single thing, we must have an opinion on every single thing, and we must defend that opinion to our dying breath, even if we are wrong, even if that opinion is shown to be based on nothing even closely resembling reality. We have to defend that opinion, because it is the definition of who we are. We defend our sin of refusing to listen to the other, the harmed one, the oppressed one, the hurt one, the alternative one, the different one, because we have forgotten that love for ourselves is nothing if we don't hold that exact same love for our neighbor, all of our neighbors.

Love your neighbor as yourself is an adage that has been repeated in church ad nauseam. So much so that it has lost most of its meaning in our modern context. Sure we're supposed to love our neighbor as ourself we say as we turn our backs on each other, refusing to listen to one another, to see one another as equals, as neighbors. Sure we're supposed to love our neighbor as ourself we say, as we work to systematically make others in this world lesser than, to strip their humanity away from them, for if they're no longer treated as human beings, if they're simply a caricature or better yet a statistic, then they can't be a neighbor for only human beings are neighbors. We refuse to love our neighbor as ourself because we have lost sight of what it means to be a neighbor. We refuse to love our neighbor because we have lost sight of what it means to love, to truly love ourselves, to truly love our neighbor.

But, this is the fulfillment of the law. It really is this simple. To see ourselves as beloved. To see others as beloved. To know that we are all in this together, even as we disagree, even as we cause harm to one another, we have the ability to come together and be called out for that sin, to seek and to accept the forgiveness for that sin, and to know that even if someone has not discovered the reality of the importance of love in this life, if they refuse to acknowledge their sin, to seek forgiveness, that we still hold them in love as our neighbor, we still hold them and love them as we should do for ourselves, for that is the fulfillment of the law.

Amen.