

One Command

sermon digests

Covenant Sunday, November 22, 2009

Luke 10:25-28

larry dipboye

Our Grace Covenant is grounded in the confession of early Christians, "God is love." With no apology for being followers of Christ, "we set no limit on the reach of God's love or the activity of God beyond the experience and faith of Christians." The meaning of the Christian faith centers in the love of God that we have experienced in Christ. Our mission is to extend the radical love of God in Christ to the world.

The Great Commandment takes a different turn in Luke. The scribe/lawyer inquires about the way to eternal life, and Jesus answers with the question, "What do you read?" The commandment is cited, not by Jesus but by the scribe and not as two commands but as one, and the focus comes to rest on love for neighbor. A contemporary of Jesus Rabbi Hillel responded to a challenge to teach the whole Law while standing on one foot. He said: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the entire Law: all the rest is commentary."

Are you surprised to find that the Golden Rule is not original with Jesus? Folks immersed in Christian exclusion of other religions sometimes find it difficult to acknowledge that some of the teachings of Jesus are not only common to other religions but cited by others long before the Christian era. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Judaism have all preserved a form of the Golden Rule. Karen Armstrong views the universal call to compassion as the foundation for belief in God in her recent book *The Case for God*. We need not be naive about significant theological differences in religions, but the universal hunger for compassion is primary. For Armstrong the call to love others transcends the conflict and exclusion in religion.

So, what's difference? Is all religion just the same? Are we to reduce the meaning of the gospel of Christ to the sentimentality that has been caricatured as, "be kind to granny and the cat." The call to radical love permeates the Christian Scriptures. In John, Jesus gave a new commandment: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." The base line is not love for self but the example of love given by Jesus, and Jesus readily acknowledged that he did not invent love. He put into flesh the love that originated in the God who is love: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." Just in case the audience of Jews might have been ready to limit the call to compassion for fellow Jews, Luke recalled the radical nature of this love: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." Only the unconditional love of God can break through the barriers of hostility and warfare in our world.

In Christ things look different. Paul said it best: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:16-18).

Sacraments of Love

Luke 10: 29-37

carolyn dipboye

Jesus' parable of the Samaritan who fell among thieves is so familiar to us and has been approached from so many directions that we are in danger of losing its message. As a matter of fact, much of the discussion over the centuries has focused at just that point. What is its primary message? Is it about simple goodness? Are we to identify with the "good" Samaritan and practice simple acts of kindness as we journey through life?

Perhaps you remember earlier encounters with the parable which went to great lengths to chastise the lawyer who questioned Jesus and the priest and Levite whose insensitivity demonstrated a legalism devoid of compassion. The lawyer, we assumed, was not asking a real question; he was just trying to trick Jesus. But, we crowed, he couldn't outfox Jesus. Just look at how Jesus turned the tables on him, making him the one questioned. Making Jesus' parables about those other guys and their shortcomings misses the point. Jesus' parables were told to bring people up short and make them think in a radically new way about themselves. Rather than chuckling about how clever Jesus was, we need to find our place in the story. What does it ask of us?

The Samaritans and Jews of the first century had their issues, but so do we. Our post 9-11 world and the global economic crisis have brought us up short. We feel an urgent need to pull our skirts up around us. Our shaken confidence make us want to constrict our outlook and limit the breadth of our responsibilities. We find ourselves thinking in terms of national borders and the financial security of our families. As frustrating as it is, here in the midst of *our* sense of alienation and crisis, not just in the midst of the alienation and crisis of the first century, the question comes to us: Who is my neighbor?

Speaking to the sequence of the two great commandments, Bill Hull points to the priority of the command to love God. "The act of loving God first completely redefines how we are to love others." The question, "Who is my neighbor?" becomes

"How can I be a neighbor?" Love for others is "no longer based on their qualifications to be loved but on the concrete actions that I take to express my love" [*Harbingers of Hope*, 184].

"Everything," we say, "changed on 9-11." And in many ways it did. But as Christians, we are called to reflect further. "Having experienced the wonder of Christian love," we say in our Covenant, "our faith in God proceeds from the confession of early Christians, 'God is love' (1 Jn 4:8) We believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world" (2 Cor. 5:19)." Our point of beginning is not the tragedy and alienation of our world, but the example of a God who came into the midst of tragedy and alienation for the sake of healing. Our purpose and the purpose of any who would act as the Body of Christ is to take our place in the story, embodying the reconciling, healing love of God in Christ. In a world that has grown increasingly guarded and harsh, we are called to imitate the "table manners" of Jesus. We are called to be sacraments—visible evidences and physical bearers of God's gracious love.

So, who is my neighbor? How far does my responsibility reach? Our Covenant seems to get it just about right: "We will cast our vision to the ends of the earth in celebration of the universal presence, love and revelation of God to the whole human family." "Love God," Jesus said; and "love your neighbor."