

It's complicated

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service October 23, 2011: Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 22:34-46.*

“Familiarity breeds contempt,” or so we are told. Clichés like that annoy us less because they are so tired than because they are so true. Today’s gospel, Matthew’s version of the Summary of the Law, is so familiar that while it does not exactly breed contempt, its unending power is easily missed. Oh, yeah, we know this: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... and your neighbor as yourself.”

“What else you got?” we wonder. We know this one. It is the first and great commandment after all; and the second one is like unto it. Got it.

But do we? Do we really get it? It seems so straightforward, but I am not so sure.

As I struggled to hear what these ancient words might be saying to me this week in hopes that I would have something to share with you, I experienced unusual resistance that frankly bewildered me. It is a wonderful passage, one, I believe, that lies at the heart of who Jesus truly was. It is utterly timely in speaking to religious fundamentalism of all sorts; it pares down and synthesizes in much the same way that Micah 6:8 does: “O Mortal, what do I require of you? But to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” In its earlier iteration, found in the gospel of Mark, the narrator is even more direct than Matthew in stating that these love commandments matter more than any system of burnt offerings and sacrifices. Here it is, then, in plain view, what I believe most: a trinity of love teachings, love for God, for self, and for others. Why would the words not simply leap from my laptop?

I think the answer, though specific to the story of my life this week, is true for all of us. Loving God, self, other is not some spiritual exercise; it is an effort that lives and has its being in the rough and tumble of our lives, some moments so high that breathing is hard—air rarefied, thin, so close to God—and some moments so low that breathing is hard—air so thick and heavy, we almost gasp. I ask, then, your forbearance in allowing me an unusually personal sermon this morning, understanding as I do the risk of such things.

Somewhat out of the blue this week, two friends shared stories with me about their lifelong struggle to love themselves. When each at separate times began, I listened to him and her as is my inclination, not only my profession. I did so respectfully and even felt glad when each reported the joy that has come from at least occasionally feeling real love for him/herself. But honestly somehow my first hearing of each story was gripped by the curse of familiarity—been there, done that. What does any of it mean, I wanted to know.

In the first case a young man told me of a breakthrough during alcohol treatment when just for a moment—such moments often are fleeting—he had come to understand that loving God, self and neighbor are in fact intricately connected—so much so that loving one without loving the other two is simply not possible. At least intellectually he understood the loving God piece, and as a good and faithful servant, he had acted quite lovingly towards others for most of his life. But it was the third piece—loving himself—that tripped him up. How many of us can identify with that? And then in many ways at the lowest point in his life, when he had publicly admitted to himself and others what he knew to be true and had begun to face the shambles of his life, he quite remarkably found that he might even be able to love himself.

A second person in retelling an old story reminded me of how difficult it had been for her to be honest about her sexuality. For years she lived a lie—albeit a very well-lived one. Successful, beautiful, active, she was the picture of happiness; but inside she was dying, not because she didn't love God or others—for she was in fact a generous lover of others—but because she could not love herself. Shame robbed her of joy and creativity. In the twists and turns that are life, she, ever the searcher, found her way to an elderly minister, how or why drawn to him she cannot remember. But in the mystery that is Grace she suddenly heard the words as though for the first time. Until she could love herself she could not really love anyone else.

Neither story, as reported to me, claimed instant cures; neither meant that the struggles magically went away. But both provided powerful evidence that love is not a hierarchy—with love for God first, others second, and finally ourselves third. Often that is how we read this story, given as we are to splits, splits in ourselves and in our ways of living and being.

These are great stories, both of them, filled with hope and honesty. And, yet, somehow hearing them did not unstop the dam that was holding back the power of this gospel lesson for me. Finally, I realized that it is not possible to preach about love with much detachment, certainly not theoretically or even particularly theologically, except as it intersects my own life today.

This week I have lived the edge of what it means to love in a very personal way someone in the throes of addiction. A friend closer than family really, beyond a doubt family of choice, whose anonymity I protect by a continent of miles, has reached a new and startling low, the aptly named “bottom” in the world of addiction and recovery. And I don't know if I or anyone else who loves her can reach her. Addiction does that. One of the hardest lessons ever to learn is that while love is all we can give, it is not always enough. Love cannot always save; and, yet, the fear of losing this friend honestly brings me to my knees. Sometimes the break inside us, the split, if you will, is too great, too prolonged and deeply ingrained by pathology and despair for it to be repaired—except in the fullness of life perhaps beyond this one. At such times, love coming from another, even from God, may not be enough to break the cycle. Unless love of self can exist in the triad, the love of God and other may not be enough. The articulate and insistent claim heard by so many—indeed by most of us at one time or another—that we are not worthy of love is beyond a doubt an unspeakable force of evil in this world.

It is complicated, love is—just like life. It is complicated by the necessity of distinguishing between love and enabling, between salvaging a life and rescuing it for yet another and lower episode. This is not a new story, nor one that is even new in my life, though this one is particularly painful and close. It is worthy of mention in a sermon simply because it is so real and so widespread. How we love at such moments in our lives are eternal acts with huge consequences, some of which, even many of which, exist way beyond our control or even the range of our love.

But love does save *us*. Imperfect though it always is, love enlarges us, redeeming us one act, one moment of love at a time. Though it may not always save the object of our love, it clearly saves us. In our magical thinking, we sometimes believe that we can love others into health, that we can love our children into safety, that we can love our lovers into never leaving. But that is not true; it is not even the purpose of love. We don't love others to save them; *their* love of God, self and others will save them. We love them because we love them, and we leave the rest to the mystery of God.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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