

The Hard Sayings of Jesus IV
Love Your Neighbor as Yourself
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Luke 10:25-28

For the past month, I have been preaching about the hard sayings of Jesus. And up to this point, the scripture texts which I have chosen have been texts which were difficult to listen to. It was not easy to hear them because what it seemed they were saying was so threatening. First there was Jesus' conversation with the rich man where he told the man that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Then there was another conversation with a couple of other "would-be" disciples where Jesus told them that there was no excuse, absolutely no excuse, for not dropping everything immediately to proclaim the kingdom of God. Last week we heard Jesus teaching on divorce, with its talk of adultery and hardness of heart. I think that Christians of any bent would agree that these are all hard sayings. They make demands on us that we do not want to hear. They tell of the uncompromising goodness which God would have us aspire to, even though we are incapable of such goodness.

On the surface of it, this morning's lesson from the gospel of Luke seems different from the last three. They were some of people's least favorite sayings of Jesus; today's lesson, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" is probably one of the best known and best loved of all Jesus' teaching...We tell it to our children; write it on banners; it is used as a regular part of worship in many churches.

And yet I would say that of all the commandments which Jesus gave us, of all the difficult guidelines he set down for Christian life, this one, this "Love your neighbor as yourself" is the hardest. This is the one which challenges and confounds us most. Perhaps we like to hear it because the words are so nice, because the feeling expressed is so generous, and yet when it comes to execution, when it comes to our actually living out the substance of the commandment, all of us fall flat, and many of us don't even try, having already set up an arsenal of excuses which tell us in advance that even trying to fulfill the commandment is impossible.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Before I talk about how we might start to try to accomplish this commandment, I would first like to outline what I think Jesus means here, what this love for neighbors is supposed to be like. And the best way I can think of is to use an example I once heard Shep use talking on a different subject. He was talking about what it meant to be "interested" in an event, and he used the example of a building on fire. If you were walking past a burning building, you could have several different responses. You could be totally disinterested. You could walk by and not even stop to look. Or you could be a little interested. You could stop and watch what was happening. Then again, if you were feeling very interested and concerned, you could stop and call the fire department, or see if there was anything you could do to help. That would show a higher degree of interest. But if you knew that you had loved ones inside the building, if you knew that your wife or your parent or your child or your best friend was inside that burning building, then your level of "interest" and willingness to intervene in the situation would rise dramatically. You would be willing to invest significantly more of yourself, perhaps even risk your own life, to see that fire extinguished and the residents of the building saved.

When Jesus talks about loving our neighbors as ourselves, I think that what he means is that we should look at all the burning buildings of this world as if our families and friends, even our own selves, were the bodies trapped by that fire. We should look at all fires of injustice and oppression, fires of war and famine, fires of poverty and despair as if our most vital self-interests were the bodies which could be damaged, broken, or consumed in the blaze.

Now the fire image is a good one to illustrate the kind of love that Jesus was talking about for two reasons. The first is that I think we can all easily imagine the horror we would feel, the pain and frantic anxiety which we would know if we knew we had loved ones caught in such a situation. Our response would be immediate. For that moment of time, all other priorities in our lives would be shifted and our chief, if not our only concern, would be to put an end to that situation, to put out the fire and save the victims. We would not put off helping until a time when we were less busy, or less tired. We would not weigh the worthiness of this crisis against that of twenty others, and take our time deciding which cause we would promote. None of the standard excuses would apply. We would be moved not by guilt but by love to immediate acting, using whatever resources we had in our efforts. How many of us respond to the many burning buildings of our world with that speed and zeal? How many of us here have responded to even one fire in which we were not directly involved with such a love?

The second reason the fire image appeals to me is that the loving frantic response of one who knows him or herself to be intimately involved in such a fire does not insure success. The loving response is made and should be made whether or not it will result in putting out the blaze. One woman calling the fire department, organizing a bucket brigade, and even risking her life to save trapped victims will not bring a guarantee of a happy ending. The fire department will have to come quickly, and other onlookers will have to help with interim measures. But even the knowledge of a low probability of success will not keep a mother from doing everything in her power to save an infant child on the third floor from disaster.

And I bring this up because along with the excuses we make about being too busy, or too tired, or too conflicted to respond to the needs of our neighbors, where most of us really fall short, the real clincher usually is a line like this: "My little contribution won't do any good." "If I send money, or change my life or act in any way, it's not going to make any difference because not everyone else will do the same." It's the best excuse for being unloving that we have devised. "My love and my concern and my action will be insufficient, so I might as well not do anything."

I do not mean here to take lightly the excuses that all of us offer as we confront a world full of burning buildings. We do get tired and we do get busy, and it's much easier to be loving towards a child dying in your own home or next door than it is to be equally concerned about nameless, faceless people we have never met and never will meet. It is hard, even to try to imagine the pain that countless other people feel and respond to as if it were our own, especially when we think we will be ineffective, when we know that our meager resources will be used up and still, if we have truly loved, we will have to carry that pain with us. It's hard to know even where to start in a world whose problems are so vast and interconnected and complex and out of our control.

Still, we hear Jesus' commandment "You must love your neighbor as yourself."

A few weeks ago, I was reading in the Christian Century about a study done jointly by the Rand Corporation and several other "think tank" sorts of agencies. Their assignment was to project the future of the world--a modest assignment. The researchers, with all the sophisticated technology we have developed to aid in such a study, painted a very bleak picture of life in the twenty-first century. They took a number of variables, including population and food supply, rate of industrialization, pollution, energy and natural resources, and the only road they could find which would not lead directly to large scale deprivation and human misery caused by massive food shortages, war, or the poisoning of the environment, was the immediate changing of consumption patterns in the industrialized nations coupled with a high degree of cooperation between the governments of the world. That was the only hope they saw for the world which we and our children and our grandchildren will inhabit along with our neighbors.

There was nothing really new to me in the study. I've heard in many places and with varying degrees of urgency, the plea that we should change. In our own self interest, because our self-interest is tied to that of our neighbors, and I am sure all you have heard it also. I was asked once by a non church goer why ministers always give topics on such dreary subjects as sin and evil and pain. "Why" he said, "don't you all preach on something positive, like progress." Well, it seems to me that this sermon is maybe the first place I've ever been able to preach a sermon about progress, for if we have made any progressive strides as a human community in understanding the gospel of Jesus Christ, it has come, I think, in understanding the commandment, "You must love your neighbor as yourself." As the world becomes more and more interconnected, we are beginning to see that the self-interest of our neighbors is our self interest. We must be interested in the course of events in other people's lives, even in other parts of the world, because they affect how we live, or even perhaps whether we live. We are beginning to understand as well how the way we live our daily lives affects the lives of people we have never seen. We begin to understand, and yet we still don't change very much, or if we do change, it is for the wrong reasons. It may be practical to conserve gasoline because it is expensive. If we loved our neighbors, we would conserve out of love. Inflation may cause us to eat less meat, to consume less, to simplify our lives; if we loved our neighbors as ourselves, we would undertake such sacrifices out of love.

What all this is leading up to, and I suppose I should warn those of you who don't already know, that this will be one of my theme songs for at least the coming year: the place where I think we begin--not where we end, but simply where we begin to love our neighbors--is by taking a look at our lifestyles and by making changes which show our concern with how our neighbors live now and how they will live in the future all over this world. For example, in a world where millions of people suffer from malnutrition, especially protein deprivation, here in the United States, 76% of all the protein produced is fed to livestock. That is because we prefer to take our protein in the form of red meat. To eat less meat can be a sign which says "Because I love my neighbors, I will eat in a way which would be consistent with a more equitable distribution of food resources in this world."

Another example is energy conservation: thermostats can be turned down, sweaters worn, walking or car pooling undertaken despite the inconveniences, not to save money, but to express love. This winter I visited a family and their house seemed downright cold. "Aren't you uncomfortable," I asked. "This is our gift to our grand-children" replied this couple in their mid-twenties.

Yet another example has to do with how we invest our money, privately and corporately. The United Church of Christ, and many other major denominations have begun monitoring their investments from the point of view of the ethics of the corporations they are invested in. Therefore, if, say, the United Church of Christ has gone on record deploring the policy of apartheid in South Africa, then the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries will not invest in Citicorp, which makes direct loans to the South African military and police. One way of loving our neighbors as ourselves has to do with at least monitoring our own investments, and then changing them if we feel that certain corporations do not reflect in their business dealings the love we want to express for our neighbors.

What all this adds up to is the idea of being more deliberately theological in the way we live our lives. And I know that "theological" is a word which to many people, myself included at times, smacks of long and intricate and boring tomes speculating on the nature of God or the true meaning of the religious impulse. But that is not necessarily true. Theology is anything which expresses what we understand about relationship with God. Sometimes it is written; more often it is acted. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor, was hung by the Gestapo because of his defiance of Hitler, that was theology. When we extend ourselves to care for the world and the people around us out of the depth of our Christian faith, that is theology. Turning down thermostats in the winter, writing letters to government officials, carrying pickets, eating less meat, not holding conventions in states which have not ratified the ERA, visiting a grieving friend, all these are theological acts, whether or not we understand them as such because the patterns even of our everyday life reflect our understanding of God and God's will for us and all people. The injunction to love our neighbors as ourselves, I believe, is the foundation on which we hang the theology in action which is our lives. And the place we have to start is by examining our lives, and searching out the places where we can make that love more apparent to ourselves and to the people we encounter. There is no guarantee that our modifications and changes will end world hunger or bring peace, or even really comfort a grieving friend. But our love, which is a reflection of the love of God, will be expressed. And that is what we have been called and commanded to do--not necessarily to solve all of the problems of our neighbors but to love them, to love them as we love ourselves.