

Do you really love God with your whole heart and all of your soul and mind? And do you, sincerely, love your neighbor in the same way? These are the tough questions of today's readings. Loving God is not measured simply by being baptized, going to church, praying regularly, or even by professing to be a Christian. Loving God completely, wholly, is born out of loving God through our love of all that is God in all of creation. And this is truly a tough task!

God's love is also evident in Paul's earliest record of his ministry. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul acknowledges that it takes courage to declare the Gospel in the face of opposition. Paul does not simply accept his ordination to share the Gospel but to do it with the gentleness of a nursemaid. How might we respond if someone would tell us that they care for us so deeply that they are determined to share not only the Gospel of God but all of themselves, because you have become very dear to them? What would you say to this?

A couple of weeks ago I asked my congregation to imagine their faces cradled in the hands of a dear one, who looks that certain way into their eyes that says total acceptance and love. They seemed to get it, so I then offered, "imagine your face cradled in God's hands!, with God looking in your eyes with total acceptance and unconditional agape love. Wow!

The officials in the Gospel of Matthew are thinking very narrowly when they ask Jesus to identify one of the more than 365 commandments as more important than the others. Their perception of what Torah meant did not include the perspective Jesus gave them. When they asked Jesus to tell them which commandment was most important Jesus answered with what seems like the broader meaning. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as

yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Without that kind of love, the law doesn't make sense. For are the 10 commandments a way to live in relational love with God (the first five) and with each other (the second 5)?

Loving God implies an attachment to God -- a commitment that goes way beyond personal, inward feelings. The same is implied towards the neighbor. Within the OT context of this commandment Lv 19:17-18,

17 "Don't secretly hate your neighbor. If you have something against him, get it out into the open; otherwise you are an accomplice in his guilt.

18 "Don't seek revenge or carry a grudge against any of your people.

"Love your neighbor as yourself.

neighbor referred to "kin". However, Lv 19:33-34 extends the love to "aliens" who reside among them.

33-34 "When a foreigner lives with you in your land, don't take advantage of him. Treat the foreigner the same as a native. Love him like one of your own. Remember that you were once foreigners in Egypt.

I wonder how much we should push this "attachment" meaning concerning church membership. I find many "members" who are not too attached to the congregation or to other members. They are more attached to recreational activities, personal leisure, hobbies, etc. Maybe giving one or two hours a week for church, but definitely not more than that. At the same time, there are those members whose commitment and involvement in church activities witness to their love of God and church. They must be limited to know more than two challenging tasks, or they may do damage to their health. Peg was one of those people. But many of us are somewhere in the in-between hoping not be noticed by the pastor.

I spent 27 years in Vermont. In fact, one of my greatest compliments was from a local. She stated I "...was a Vermonter born in the wrong place!" This was right before I was elected, at 26 years old, to Direct a six-town Senior Center. There is a distinct and earned prejudice concerning the "flatlander" who moves into Vermont. Many of us "flatlanders" thought we could earn citizenship in one lifetime. Thus the

'ol saying, "even though the cat has kittens in the oven, it doesn't make em biscuits!" Well I could never accomplish 3-5 generations in one lifetime and I could never convince the populace that I was old enough to be President of the Senior Citizens.

We learn that many prejudices have their roots in the misunderstandings, artificial roadblocks to loving that we construct and use as barriers against our neighbors and God.

Anyway, I've thought: that's the same attitude that many long-time church members have. They really aren't opposed to newcomers, but they expect the new people to love the church as much as they do. Or, to be as connected to the congregation as they are (or used to be). Or, to give as much money, or step up to the challenge, or... whatever. That's why we place memorial markers on refrigerators and the like. We want to be significant in our love and be remembered for our efforts, while expecting everybody to understand. While what is commanded of us is to be active in our love, we must remember that the love we must emulate is the love of that One who is fully human and fully God!

Jesus knit together a pattern for us. He makes it clear that we must love God with every part of us, and every part of us must love all that loves God. Jesus modeled that for us in his life. He loved God even when it meant that he would know suffering and death. Jesus loved even those persons we might not cross the street for, ones we're inclined to judge harshly. We have to ask ourselves if we could do the same. We have to ask ourselves if the readings seem unrelated to our lives or if we could see our own lives in them.

The world we live in might, at first glance, seem to be different from the Old or New Testament worlds—but are they really? We cannot deny the context of the Old Testament story. We read about the oppression of the Israelites and their journey to freedom but do we consider who is being oppressed today? Even more difficult is asking ourselves if we are

ourselves oppressors or, more importantly, if we treat every person justly. How do we love God when we are not acting justly?

These are difficult questions. And we have to ask ourselves if we are living justly and loving God with our whole heart and soul and mind. But what does it mean to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind? Since all relationships touch our hearts, soul, or mind, we would have to say that this means that every part of us needs to love God. And if the second commandment is like the first, we are expected to love all relationships as we love God.

Jesus is not qualifying these relationships to mean only people or only the people we want to love. Jesus is describing all things in all of creation. And, it goes one step further, because Jesus also tells us that we cannot love God if we do not love all that God made in creation. This is what he meant by "the second is like the first," and what is most difficult about the Gospel reading today because of the nature of the world in which we live. And yet no one comes into this world with the natural ability to love. It must be taught by those who have both studied and experienced the agape love of God.

In a wonderful little book, *Dudley's Dog Days: Joining Faith to Life*, by Harley G. Rusch, the family has just bought a cocker spaniel puppy named Dudley. On their way to grandma's house to show off the newest member of the family, they stop at an ice cream store. It was a hot summer day -- and, of course, Dudley was given an ice cream cone, too. Next they stopped at a hamburger stand for some food, and you guessed it. Dudley had hardly gotten the hamburger down, when it came right back up -- along with the remains of the ice cream.

They get to grandma's house, who quickly gave her grown son a tongue-lashing: "How could you give a puppy an ice-cream? Don't you know anything about taking care of a puppy?"

The author writes about his experience:

We were inexperienced at showing love to a dog. Although we loved him at first sight, the technique by which we showed that love needed a lot of improvement.

It would not be the last time either. The first walk, the first trip to the vet, the first night, all proved that some expertise was needed in the art of loving a puppy.

Society has told us by means of movies and television that love is something that just happens. Caring for another is something you just do. This is such a misinterpretation. To love takes the desire but also a lot of practice, preparation, and perspiration.

We discovered with Dudley that there are proper and correct ways to show love. There are also acts that can be motivated by love, but can in effect be unloving -- like ice-cream cones for puppies.

The love Jesus calls for way beyond warm feelings. It can often involve "practice, preparation, and perspiration." In some cases loving others means giving a dose of "tough love", that is love that is corrective...

In an interview with H. Stephen Gleen called "Creating (or Preventing) the Potential for Addiction," he is asked:

What is the most common mistake parents make, when it comes to raising their children, that contributes to this problem of low self-esteem and leaves a kid vulnerable to alcohol and drug abuse?

His answer: "weaning."

"Weaning?" you may ask. "What does he mean by that?"

It means learning to make decisions independent of mom and dad.

We seem to have become a generation of "super-parents" who believe their children should never know boredom or experience the negative consequences of their decisions. Take the issue of boredom, for example. This generation of kids is continually bored. And when a child comes to a parent and says, "I'm bored" the loving parent should say, "I understand that, honey. It happens to me periodically, too." I have never known a kid who, if allowed to be bored for an hour, didn't become so bored with boredom that they didn't figure out how to get un-bored. Instead, what happens is that a kid comes to their parent and says they are bored. The parent says, "Well, why don't you...?" And the kid says, "No, I don't want to do that." Then the parent makes a few more suggestions, which are all rejected for one reason or another. So the parent racks their brain trying to think of something their kid can do to keep from being bored. Money or stuff may be involved in the bribe to avoid a temper-tantrum.

Why should a child be totally dependent on Mom and Dad to solve their problem of boredom?

This is the world that is being destroyed by consumerism and greed. The same world that turns its head as the rainforests burn away and glaciers melt. The world where we would rather drive bigger cars, construct homes way beyond our need, where both are consuming more of our world's oil and natural gas faster than we can purchase or produce. This is the same world that answers the needs for more fuel by destroying more and more of God's creation. How do we reconcile our love for God with our whole hearts, souls, and minds with these facts?

How also do we reconcile ourselves to loving God with all that we are when we so willingly go to church and then partake in drinking coffee at our "coffee hours" in Styrofoam cups? How does it make sense for us to be more interested in loving the things that we buy with our money while looking away as we pass the person on the street who is asking for help? How are we loving God with all that we are when we choose to separate ourselves from others using God's own words as our defense?

Every day God gives us many opportunities to "get right with God's Self". Every day when the sun rises we can either take the gift for granted or thank God for another day, by acknowledging the miracle of each new day. You know the prayer: *Lord, give me the grace today to face today, and all I need to get through my day.* Say this prayer before your feet hit the floor and see what a difference it makes.

Every day of our life we are interacting with the world around us. Do we love all our world with all that we are—our hearts, our minds, and our souls?

My friends, it is not about proving that we get it and love God. It is about showing that we love God, no holds bared, no limitations, no quid pro quos, or distractions, and get it with all of our hearts, souls, and minds. And we make a similar effort to love our neighbors with the same care and concern that God has afforded us.

Acknowledgements:

Brian Stoffregen of Faith Lutheran Church, Proper 25A, Year A

David Zersen, commentary

United Methodist Church General Board of Discipleship, sermon helps