

Pentecost 20, Proper 25
 October 26, 2014
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Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'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."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

When I lived in New York City for three years, I was not sure how it was going to go, not sure what it would be like for an Iowa born girl to live in the big city. But I grew to love it, and one of the things I grew to love quite a lot was the New York Times. To this day, if I have time to read it, I treat myself to a copy of the Sunday times, just for old time's sake. After responsibly reading the lead story, a secret pleasure is to proceed to the Styles section.

I usually begin with the wedding story found in the back of that section, -- some happy news to offset the usually more sobering lead story I have just read. Then I am on to a weekly reader submitted essays called Modern Love. Say the editors of the Times:

The editors of Modern Love are interested in receiving deeply personal essays about contemporary relationships, marriage, dating, parenthood...any subject that might reasonably fit under the heading "Modern Love."

No simple boy meets girl, two fall in love, marry, buy a house with a white picket fence, start having kids. As if it ever was that way. The point of the series, is that

love is complicated. Probably always has been, we just didn't talk about it very much.

So with a nod to the title of that New York Times column, today's sermon is about modern Christian love.

I propose that modern Christian love,
 that to love your neighbor as yourself,
 or do unto others as you would have them do unto you,
 is no simple straightforward matter in these contemporary times.
 Because we do live in complicated times--from Ebola to ISIS to global warming to global warming skeptics, how to love each other well-- well, what does that look like in this day and age? What *would* Jesus do?

This past week I attended the diocesan sponsored event on creating civil discourse, where our presiding bishop and various people from different faith traditions, and from social science disciplines and from the media weighed in on our current climate of civil discourse. Which is as you may have observed, far from civil. It appears that we Americans aren't getting along with each other very well these days. According to one poll, some 80 % of us are worried about the divisive tone of the civic climate of our nation. For that 80%, there is concern that there is a decided lack of love between, or within, the neighbors of this nation.

So, it seems a good time for us to ask, as Christians, how might we practice love of neighbor in such a climate? Beyond visiting prisoners, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, are their other, equally important habits and practices that are especially needed in our time,
 and are especially reflective of Jesus' command to love our neighbor?

Well, maybe. Just to get us started, here are a few practices I thought of. Maybe you will have some to add. Maybe we can start a list. The Church of the Advent list of loving. So, without further adieu...

#1 Christian love involves curiosity. When faced with a troubling situation or person, or act, rather than rushing to judgment about what is going on, or reacting with fear, or lashing out anger, or smothering with pity, we first seek to understand. We want to know more. We ask, we observe, we test our hypothesis. We are humble and don't assume to have the answer. Curiosity about someone-- about their experience, about their fears, needs, about their burdens, can go a long way towards loving them well. *Christian love is curious.*

#2 Christian love sometimes involves using our imaginations. Martin Luther King is said to have preached about the critical role imagination played in the story of the Good Samaritan, used as an example of by Jesus of what it means to love our neighbor. King proposed that it was the Samaritan's ability to imagine the pain and fear of the wounded man lying by the side of the road, that prompted him to stop to help. His act of love went beyond habitual charity, -- and we know that habitual charity certainly didn't prompt the pious priests to stop and help,

but his love was based on his ability to imagine the plight of another, that was the first act of love by the good Samaritan. *Christian love requires us to use our imaginations.*

#3 Patience is a feature of Christian love-- this one is easy to understand but hard to practice. Sometime our impatience is with someone, their stubbornness, their slowness in understanding. But for me at least, it goes even deeper than that--I get pretty impatient with how long it can take for things to change, for them to get better. It helps me to remember that my adversary can't help it that they are human, and for humans, change generally takes time. And it helps to remember that I am human too--sometimes I have to practice patience towards my own impatience!

Christian love is more like a crock pot than a microwave.

#4 It helps us to love others, then, if we can trust that though the process may be painfully slow, God will eventually bring things round right. Love is slow work. Redemption happens a moment at a time. The bigness of Easter morning resurrections may catch our attention, point to what is possible, but almost all the work of redemption, almost all the resurrections we know, will be smaller, subtler, though no less important. When learning to love neighbor as self, when learning to love God with all our heart and mind and strength and soul, sometimes it helps to remember past times when God has touched us, brought things round right, brought us out of death into life. *Recalling our own, personal stories of resurrection can help us maintain trust that God is at work bringing new life to the world and our love of the world is not wasted.*

#5 In the meantime, we can remember that God is absolutely drenching us with signs of the kingdom of heaven that surrounds us. Jesus promises us that we don't have to wait until we are dead and gone from this life to begin to see heaven. Heaven, bits of it at least, are here and now, and they are precious.

Maybe it is a glimpse of the natural world that stuns us with its beauty.
 Maybe it is seeing the courageous act of someone in the face of injustice. Maybe it
 is a moment of deep connection with another.
 Maybe it is a moment of deep peace that passes *all* understanding.

Maybe only you know what it was,
 that moment of grace that is so unique to who you are, what you know,
 how your life has been.
 But heaven is happening all the time, and remembering that fact,
 keeping it central to our life view, well, ---that actually helps us to love others.
 It feeds us, it strengthens us, it keeps us going when loving is hard work.
Noticing heaven when it happens helps us to be more loving people.

So, that's my list, for today.
 Curiosity,
 imagination,
 patience with the slow-cooker ways of love,
 trust that God is at work while we wait,
 remembering our own resurrection stories.

What is on your list? How do you love others? How do you keep your focus?
 Not, *what* do you do, but how do you do it? How do you keep doing it when it is
 hard. Maybe you can share it with us sometime.

When it comes to loving God with all your heart
 and all your mind
 and all your soul,
 learning how to love your neighbor becomes a part of learning how to love God.
 That's the wisdom Jesus teaches.

So, what helps you love your neighbor a yourself?