

"As Simple As That"  
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18  
Matthew 22: 34-40  
October 23, 2011  
Mary Cunningham Gause

Matthew 22:34-40 (NRSV)

- 34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together
- 35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.
- 36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"
- 37 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.'
- 38 This is he greatest and first commandment.
- 39 And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'
- 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Leviticus 19:1-2; 15-18 (NRSV)

- 1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:
- 2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.
  
- 15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.
- 16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor; I am the LORD.
- 17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.
- 18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

Tying your shoes! It is a milestone in growing up. Something that your parents do for you for so long...then one day, you are big enough to do it yourself. Or so we think...No I don't remember learning to tie my shoes. It just seems like one day I just knew how. So it never occurred to me – in this day of Velcro and slip ons – that I would need to teach Will Grey to tie his shoes. But this summer I determined it was time. Taking this as a serious parental responsibility, I thought about the directions I would give and the demonstration I would show. In my mind I even thought about the tone of my voice – strong, supportive and encouraging – and I envisioned this task being accomplished in all of 10 minutes.

So the day came – I explained, the laces and pull through. Make a loop with one hand and with your other hand wind the other around and poke it through the hole. Pull tight and voila "It is as simple as that". Seeing just how easy I made it sound, Will Grey eagerly jumped to the task. Cross the laces and pull through. Make a loop and with your other hand wind around and poke the lace through the hole...(repeat 2x). "Come

on Will Grey. You can do it!" After several tries – a frustrated and crushed 6 year old crumbled into tears saying it is NOT as simple as that. And he was right.

As I prepared for this sermon this morning, my initial thoughts on reading both the Matthew and Leviticus passages were, "Ah – as simple as that!" But as I thought, prayed and wrestled...I found myself frustrated, rushed and yes sometimes crumbled into tears..simple is not a word I would use to describe our passages today.

The Leviticus passage begins with a marvelous declaration to the entire congregation of Israel..."you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy..." Holiness is the foundational principle to all teachings in this chapter. Holiness is the essential nature of God...holiness IS God. Holiness is defined as sacred or set apart. Certainly God is set apart from everyone and everything. God is different and independent BUT God chooses to be with us – chooses to live among us – and in doing so intends for us to be holy, too.<sup>1</sup> Remember that God made us in God's image...and God has placed within us what we need to be able to do what God asks<sup>2</sup>. To be holy means to imitate God. To be holy recognizes that all one does is rooted...deeply rooted...in the understanding that because God is holy and calls us holy...every single thing we do should grow out of that holiness. To be holy is not to enact some moral piety reminiscent of Dana Carvey's church lady impression but rather a way of living that infuses everything we do. At work – we are holy; with family – we are holy; at the store – we are holy; on the bus/plane/subway – we are holy; when we worship – we are holy; Wherever we are; whatever we do; God sits with us – guiding us and walking with us as we do our best to imitate God. Sounds simple...right?

To our Hebrew brothers and sisters, how one lives out that holiness includes loving one's neighbors. Neighbor would have been those outside of your kin or family but still within your own tribe. (ie. Other Israelites) Walter Brueggemann talks about the love of this passage as one that emphasizes "public obligation, in a neighborly, (covenantal) framework to care for and enhance the well-being and dignity of neighbor."<sup>3</sup> Specifically, it meant leaving produce in the fields for the poor to glean; It meant speaking with neighbors honestly and directly; it meant all persons should be paid prompt and fair wages. Loving one's neighbor meant ensuring neighbors had food, just wages and dignity just as we would want for ourselves.

Jesus expands the understanding of love and neighbor which lie at the heart of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Using the Shema – the most basic and central creed for Judaism ( "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.") Jesus reminds the Pharisees and the disciples of the love God has for all and calls for

---

<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4: Leviticus 19:1-2;15-18 Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster-John Knox, 2011. p195.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes. Westminster-John Knox; Louisville 2002. p. 126.

them to have for themselves and their neighbors. It is “a love which dominates or trumps our emotions, a love which directs our thoughts, and a love which is the (catalyst) of our actions.”<sup>4</sup> It is not a love that is based on emotions but one that reflects action in the best interest of neighbor.

In several places throughout the gospels Jesus illustrates God’s love for those outside the Israelite community: he eats with the taxpayer Zacchaeus and stays at his house; he heals a man with leprosy; he touches the woman who bled for seven years and immediately she is whole; he teaches of a Samaritan – a tribe that was the enemy of the Israelites - as the only one who stops to help a seriously injured Jewish man. Through these and many other gospel accounts...Jesus broadens the definition of neighbor to move beyond the Israelite community to include Gentiles and ultimately all the children of God.

Frederick Beuchner describes love of God and love of neighbor this way “...love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. You can easily produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as you can a yawn or a sneeze. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being. Thus in Jesus’ terms, we can love our neighbors without necessarily liking them. This does not mean that liking may not be a part of loving, only that it doesn’t have to be. Sometimes liking follows on the heels of loving. It is hard to work for people’s well-being very long without coming in the end to rather like them too.”<sup>5</sup>

Loving God – Loving Neighbor – Being Holy...they all require action on our part. They require us to roll up our sleeves and to join in on what God is doing in the world...not how we think God should act but what God is already doing!

There is a story that goes, “Father Abraham himself invited a beggar to his tent for a meal. When grace was being said, the man began to curse God, declaring that he could not bear to hear his name. Seized with indignation, Abraham drove the blasphemer away. When Abraham was at his prayers that night, God said to him, “This man has cursed and reviled me for fifty years, and yet I have given him food to eat every day. Could you not put up with him for a single meal?” That is what it means to be holy. That is what it means to love our neighbors.”<sup>6</sup>

Because we are holy...and because we love God ... God calls us to love all of our neighbors...and doing so often involves taking risks. Jesus certainly stepped over social boundaries and offered love and grace to those that society deemed the least, the vulnerable, and unlovable. Jesus calls us to step up to that same challenge; He calls us out of our comfortable spaces and into places where we make ourselves vulnerable enough that we just may see the face of God in someone who is nothing like

---

<sup>4</sup> Barclay, William *The Gospel of Matthew; volume 2*. Westminster-John Knox, Louisville 1976. p 278.

<sup>5</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*. Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1973. pp 64-65.

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Fairchild, Sermons & Sermon Lectionary Resources, [www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermon.html](http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermon.html)

us; Loving our neighbor often puts us in places where we are forced to rely upon God and our neighbors, it very well may challenge us in ways that run counter to the very society in which we reside but in doing so we just may be forever changed.

Maybe loving our neighbor means participating in a prison ministry or becoming a guardian ad litem; For some it may be a weekly visit to Clemson Community Care to drop off canned goods with a few extra minutes of visiting with a client while she waits; For some it may be working as a family to deliver Christmas boxes and taking a few extra minutes to ask about the family who is receiving the box; For some it may mean organizing a work trip to an area of need and taking some of your vacation to make it happen; And for some it may begin with writing letters to missionaries...and end up being a way to learn about other people and other experiences in other cultures. And for others...who knows!? The challenge is to take that first step out of what is comfortable...for you it may be a small step or it may be a giant leap...but be warned. Because once you do it...your just may find yourself so changed that you begin to look at the world differently...you may find yourself so changed that you begin to look at your neighbors differently. At the very least...you will widen your definition of neighbor and experience what it means to be holy.

I have no doubt that there are some in this world who will disagree with the idea that God calls us to love all of our neighbors. They may argue we are already doing enough for our neighbors; there may be some who believe there are always exceptions to the rule – some neighbors whom we just can't love. I have no doubt that there some of our neighbors are far more difficult to love than others – some neighbors that I have absolutely no idea what I would do if I was put into a position of being in relationship with them...and I am thankful every day that God does not call us to act alone but to do so as a part of the community of faith because as uncomfortable as it is ...I think God is pretty clear...we are to be holy, to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves with the same indiscriminate love that God shows. We don't have to understand that love and we certainly don't have to like our neighbor...but in this passage I hear we are called – as individuals and as the community of faith – to do it...to make sure our brothers and sisters have food, have shelter, have dignity. Perhaps the truest test comes when we ask ourselves the question, 'are we willing to trade places with our neighbors?' Any hesitation just may be a sure sign that we have more work to do<sup>7</sup>...And yes, I do believe it is as simple as that!

All glory be to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4: Leviticus 19:1-2;15-18 Marvin M Ellison, Westminster-John Knox, 2011. p198.