

Pr 10 C Deuteronomy 30: 9-14 Luke 10: 25-37 Colossians 1: 1-14

So, a lawyer comes to Jesus, and he says, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

I have done everything on the checklist for being the great person that I am suppose to do. What in fact do I need to do to gain eternal life?

Jesus gives him an answer that has lived on in the words from Deuteronomy, so important to our Jewish sisters and brothers.

“You shall love the Lord God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

These are possibly the most stirring words in the Holy Bible, a stunning and amazing summary of what God dearly hopes of us all.

But in this gospel lesson the lawyer seems to have the timing of a great comedian. There is a pause, a few beats, and then as if delivering a bad punch line - he says - “And who is my neighbor?”

Over and over again, the gospel message, the point of the teachings of Jesus Christ, to love God fully and above all the loyalties - is not complicated.

The message to love God and everyone is stunningly simple.

The problem we have with it, we, the church, our nation, the whole world is  
that it is really, really hard!

To love everyone, starting with God, with every fiber of your being - God in  
every decision you make, God as your Morning Star, God as your Setting  
Sun, God as your environment, your context, God as the living assumption of  
your life - it is not complicated, but it is oh, so difficult.

Which of us DOES love God?

What is it to LOVE God?

The saints through the centuries have loved God. Their whole lives revolved  
around God, they wept and laughed and danced for the love of God.

When St. John of the Cross was staying at a convent over Christmas, one of  
the sisters saw him, when he thought no one was looking, picking up the  
figure of the child Jesus from the crib.

He hugged it to his chest and then, with eyes closed, danced around the crib  
for some minutes.

Well, that it seems, is love of God; a devotion that results in an all-pervading  
warmth and delight and gladness beyond words.

If this is loving God, I would say that most of do not!

Even if we allow for those charismatic gifts of tongues or tears, it is still only  
a momentary thing.

Some would say easy emotionalism.

Others might say that all loving God means is having good dispositions,  
avoiding mortal sins, possessing basic good behavior.

That is one practical solution: Love of God as a matter of will, not of  
emotion, loyal 'church-person-hood' and keeping within the rules.

Some austere theologians have said that we really cannot love God, that  
there is only God's love for us. Forget all those woolly headed thoughts about  
mystical love, as in the end it is actually greedy, possessive human love.

The only love worth the name is God's, pure and uncaused.

We cannot love like that because all our love is selfish, desiring our own  
profit.

Our only response can be faith, and a faith that asks nothing in return - so  
these theologians would say.

Others have talked about 'pure love' of God that is indifferent to any gain or  
reward.

'If God sends me to hell, I shall still love God.'

All of these notions - good will and effort, or faith alone, or a pure disinterested love - they all come out to the same thing: love of God is an attitude of the will rather than a feeling.

There is something true and useful here.

We are reminded that our emotions are a part and not the whole of our Christian life.

But surely there is something more, something more full and expansive and life-giving that Jesus meant, something that reaches and encompasses heart and soul and strength and mind.

Were the saints simply having occasional regrettable lapses into self-indulgent emotionalism?

I don't think so. Here is what I think.

Our will to love God does not operate in a vacuum. Our free choices are not just arbitrary.

We choose because we are drawn. We are attracted. We are moved to love God because of God's attractiveness.

We turn to God because of what we see in God.

We are moved because we desire.

To use Paul's words, God "makes his appeal to us," in shamelessly human terms, in passionate terms that are full of emotion.

God sent a fully human One so that we could touch and feel and sense and be drawn and know that we desire God for our life and hope and fulfillment. It is the beauty and complete love of God that I see in Jesus Christ that draws me away from merely myself and toward the One who fashions me into what

I was actually created to be.

Like it or not, love is hopelessly entangled in need and dependence, the need to find another, human or divine, and therein the happiness we cannot find or generate in ourselves.

Loving God does mean desiring and wanting and choosing - or as the psalmist has it - longing for the living God.

Simple, but oh, so difficult?

All by myself I can imagine that I do truly love God, and there are moments when I believe that is true.

So what makes it so hard, so difficult, as I claimed at the start?

Well, again I will tell you what I think.

It is of course those additional five words “and your neighbor as yourself.”

And those final four words “Go and do likewise.”

The one with whom Jesus is in dialogue in the gospel lesson is a nice, powerful, successful, focused, maybe even driven man who happens to be a

lawyer. And one who knows his scripture.

He is interested in attaining eternal life. He is serious.

And Jesus reminds him of the Jewish summary of the law.

After a pause, it is not about loving God that he asks, it is about the neighbor.

“Who is my neighbor?” is his reasonable query.

And as a response, Jesus tells him a story that embodies the answer,

“Everybody.”

Most of us know this story very well and what makes loving God with all our heart, of soul strength and mind so difficult - probably too well. Our neighbor!

In these days of dreadful and terrible violence – yes even now – there is a temptation for us to use some of the lawyer’s evasive reasoning, even if unconsciously.

‘I have not been selling CDs or loose cigarettes so maybe I am safe.’

‘I do not serve as a law enforcement officer so maybe I am safe.’

‘I have not waved a plastic toy pistol so maybe I am safe.’

‘I was not dancing in a packed club in Florida so maybe I am safe.’

‘I don’t live on the South Side of Chicago so maybe I am safe.’

‘I am white so even if my tail light is broken maybe I am safe.’

I have a sense that Jesus is turning his patient and pitying gaze from the lawyer to me, to any of us, who silently try to create a few protective layers of remove like that lawyer.

Trying to find some inches of protection even if we tell ourselves that we are trying in this mental exercise to wrap our minds around the situation.

Even if we are trying to get some space to affirm the world of God’s creation and to live into the love to which God calls us.

Even if we are trying to be sure that we love God.

What story would Jesus tell me, tell you, so that we might understand that the answer is ‘Everybody’ and that we are ‘Everyone?’ So that I see clearly that loving God is not a private matter?

How would that patient Jesus get me to see that ‘neighbor’ are the stopped drivers and dancers and Bible studiers and law protectors and small change

hucksters and the little children who wave sparklers and shoot baskets long after sunset or sit obediently in their elementary school?

How would Jesus, his eyes filled with pity, get us to see that 'neighbor' is the one victimized by our gun culture and lax gun regulation and the NRA? That 'neighbor' is also the one who has not paid child support or skipped a few visits to their probation officer?

That 'neighbor' includes the addicted, or the manipulative, the exploitative, the selfish, the one who votes moneyed self-interest in the hall of Congress and in our state legislatures?, And yes, even the shooters?

That 'neighbor' includes both the 0.1% and the disenfranchised, as well the one with whom I vigorously disagree in this election season.

What story do we need to hear for us to know that our wounds have been touch by the healing sting of wine, calmed under the soothing caress of oil, that we've been checked into the hospitality of Hotel Compassion where dwells the living God?

What story will convince us that going and doing likewise is the love for which God yearns?

What story Jesus?

Because I, we, our nation and world need to hear it.

Even in the midst of our grief, we need to hear it.

We need to hear it, so that we can really live it, with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and our whole mind.



So that we can choose love over fear!

What story, Jesus?

Amen.