

Holy One, renew in us love and faith  
and a vision of what it might mean to live as though you were real,  
and we mattered and everyone was sister and brother.  
What we want to ask is for awareness that is keen enough  
to sense your presence here, now, there, then, always. Amen.

The verb to command and the noun commandment have been on my mind  
a lot this week, starting with last Sunday's collect in which we prayed,  
"make us love what you command." MAKE us love what you command.  
It just sounded so darned, well, heavy handed.  
"Make" and "love" just don't seem to belong in the same sentence.  
And then I was watching a series currently on PBS called Veterans  
which looks at the experiences of soldiers throughout our history.  
There are videos of recruits in boot camp running 12 miles with 100 lb packs  
and of sergeants screaming at them to shape up.  
All I could think of was I think I would have lasted about 24 hours  
before going AWOL.  
There's something about being told what to do,  
especially told to do something that apparently makes no sense,  
that is hard to take.  
It's those commands, as in commandments, that can rankle.  
For those of us who grew up in the age of Aquarius  
when one of the rallying cries was "Question Authority"  
it's hard to find positive associations with being commanded to do anything.  
And we've only continued down that path.  
Today organizations are discouraged from top-down decision making  
in favor of giving every stakeholder, as they say, a voice.  
Athletic coaches don't just order athletes to go out and run 2 miles,  
they explain why it's important and how it will benefit the team.  
So the model of one ruler telling everyone else what to do  
seems at best outmoded and at worst dictatorial.  
And this morning we hear Jesus commanding us to love God and neighbor.  
Some of you may also have a negative reaction to phrases that begin,  
"I command you to...".  
But the critical difference here that many theologians have noted  
is that when it comes to commands,  
God whose sole concern is our wellbeing  
without any hidden agendas or power plays,  
is the only one who can legitimately command us really to do anything  
but especially to love.

The commandment to love can only proceed from the mouth of the Lover,  
with a capital L.

God speaks with the voice of love itself.

So that helped me and perhaps you to make peace with God's commandments,  
or Friendly Suggestions as some like to call them.

When Jesus answers the scribe's question  
about which commandment is first of all,  
he does so using the words that the Sadducees know best,  
words that faithful Jews still say every day.

They come from the reading in Deuteronomy this morning.

It's called the Shema Yisrael, Hear, O Israel.

In it the foundation is laid for the religion that became Judaism.

'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,  
and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

And how are we to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength?

Look at the verbs, strong verbs, that follow in this passage.

We are to KEEP the words of this commandment,

IMPRESS them on our children,

RECITE them at home and away,

BIND them on our body,

and INSCRIBE them on our doorposts.

In other words, they are to be front and center in every part of our lives.

Maimonides wrote that we are to love God with an intense love

that knits our souls to God's, with love that is an obsession,

a state of lovesickness in which nothing can divert us

from loving God before everything and everyone else.

That is quite a tall order!

I wish I could say that kind of fierce love characterizes my love for God  
but it does not.

There have been moments or even brief periods

when I loved God with that intensity but for the most part, honestly,

my love for God is usually buried under a lot of unnecessary distractions  
and competing desires.

But what a beautiful goal for every one of us –

to love God with such singlemindedness and devotion.

You notice that the scribe asks Jesus

for the single most important commandment, one commandment,

and Jesus, never one to be hemmed in by any of our inadequate questions, gives him 2 commandments in return.

They are equally important he says.

You can't have one without the other.

Now the fact that Jesus paired these 2 commandments – loving God and neighbor – was nothing new.

They had been combined in other early Jewish documents.

The really new thing Jesus did was to make them equally weighty.

He took the most foundational commandment,

you shall love the Lord your God, and attached its weight to the second.

It would be like being chosen to be the opening band for a Bruce Springsteen concert.

Suddenly that first band acquires a new gravitas they never had before.

So the loving your neighbor commandment gets a big endorsement and takes on a new meaning that it had not previously had.

What does that mean, what does that do? It is wildly significant.

What Jesus does by yoking these 2 commandments together

is to say that loving God, which can be an impersonal

and obedient kind of love must, must be tempered by another kind of love, a compassion for each other.

The first commandment by itself can emphasize law and morality, doing things correctly.

It can be used to impose purity codes and lots of regulations.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment essentially sends all the regulations into the shredder.

It leaves us with questions and not answers.

It forces us to deal with complexities and hard decisions that the first commandment by itself does not.

It makes life messier, less predictable, but much richer, much deeper, much more satisfying.

Love, as the scribe notes, is much more important than performing rituals and sacrifices.

The question throughout our lives is how well we love, not how many prayers we say or services we attend.

Prayers and services help us to love well but they are not ends in themselves.

If we make the mistake of thinking that the most important measure

of our faith is how we perform its practices, how many laws we have obeyed,

Jesus came to make it clear that it's how we treat each other

that is the real measure.

There is a wonderful description of the difference between law and love, the difference between merely moral human beings and humans who have been transformed in C.S. Lewis' essay, "Man or Rabbit" which I suggest should be renamed "Human or Rabbit." "Mere morality is not the end of life," he wrote. "The Divine Life in Jesus Christ calls us to be gods and intends for us something in which morality will be swallowed up. We are to be remade. All the rabbit in us is to disappear – the worried, conscientious, ethical rabbit as well as the cowardly and sensual rabbit. We shall bleed and squeal as the handfuls of fur come out; and then, surprisingly, we shall find underneath it all a thing we have never yet imagined: a real person, an ageless god, a child of God, strong, valiant, wise, beautiful, and drenched in joy... In setting up 'a good life' as our final goal, we have missed the very point of our existence. Morality is the mountain which we cannot climb by our own efforts; and if we could we should only perish in the ice and unbreathable air of the summit, lacking those wings with which the rest of the journey has to be accomplished. For it is from there that the real ascent begins. The ropes and axes are done away and the rest is a matter of flying."