

**Sermon on Matthew 22:34-36 at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine**  
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The first part of the reading that we heard today from the Gospel of Matthew brings to mind two questions that continually plague humankind:

1. Who is my neighbor? and
2. What is love?

The concepts of “neighbor” and “love” are so nuanced and so subjective that I’m sure each of us in this room today would have a slightly different answer as to what they mean. Jesus leaves us to ponder these questions in his encounter with the Pharisees.

This moment in Jesus’ life occurs at a crucial time. It is after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and before his crucifixion. The Sadducees and the Pharisees have been questioning him and challenging his authority. They are especially angry at him because he recently turned over the moneychangers’ tables in the temple and declared “It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of thieves.”

This man is calling himself God and saying that the temple is his own house, and the authorities are outraged. They ask him a series of questions to try and trip him up and expose him as a fraud.

The Pharisees ask him “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” and Jesus responds “‘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 the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

And so, Jesus answers the Pharisees’ question not with one greatest commandment but with two. The first is from Deuteronomy, and the second is from Leviticus. Jesus says that on both of these ancient commandments, from the earliest times of the story of the Israelites, “hang all the law and the prophets.”

These two concepts – neighbor and love – are the summary of all the commandments that God has communicated to humankind. Everything we do, Jesus tells us, should be rooted in the love of God and the love of our neighbor. You must love your neighbor in order to love the God who loves all of creation.

The concept of “neighbor” in Jesus’ time was rooted in the ethical belief system of the Ancient Near East, in which people regarded their neighbor as a member of their family, their tribe, or their nation. Loving your neighbor, in that framework, meant caring for your own. The world was a hostile place, and people believed that they had to stick together and fight the enemy to survive. They believed it was us against them.

This pronouncement of the greatest commandment is mentioned in all three of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In the Gospel of Luke, someone in the crowd calls out in response to Jesus’ declaration and asks, “But who is my neighbor?” and Jesus responds with the story of the Good Samaritan. He tells his audience about a man who was brutally beaten and was not helped by a fellow member of his tribe or his nation, but by a Samaritan – a member of a group that were sworn enemies of the Jewish people. He was not helped by one of us but by one of them. Jesus does here what he does over and over in the Gospels – he takes an ancient idea that is universally accepted

– us against them - and turns it on its head. Your neighbor, Jesus tells us, is not just someone who is in your family, your tribe, or your nation. Your neighbor is also your enemy, and you are called to love your enemy.

But what is love? What does it mean to love your enemies? It's hard enough to love your family, your tribe, or your nation when there is so much bickering and division. How can we even love those who are like us? Why does God give us such a seemingly impossible commandment – to love THEM?

The love Jesus speaks of here is almost beyond our comprehension. It is the love of all humankind. It is a love that seeks the good of every living thing. It is vast and unconditional. It does not play favorites. It is not a love of only us, and not them.

But how can we love a person or a group that seeks violence against us? How can we love those who take advantage of our kindness? How do we love without enabling? How do we love without pouring out so much of ourselves that we have nothing left to give? For many of us, love is a risky and fearful proposition.

Well, the good news is, we're allowed to have boundaries. We are allowed to love with safeguards in place that protect us from harm. Those of us who love people who suffer from addiction are taught that we can love them by directing them toward professional treatment and not try to fix them ourselves. People who are trapped in abusive relationships learn that they can stop engaging with the abuser and take themselves out of harm's way. We can always leave situations that might be dangerous and practice the time-honored 12-step method of detaching with love.

If we cannot safely engage directly with people or groups, we can love them by not allowing hatred and rage towards them to grow in our hearts. We can end the cycle of destructive energy by building up the Kingdom of God with love and compassion in our own souls.

Jesus tells us we can and we should pray for our enemies – and not just the old grudging prayer of “Ok, God, this guy is a huge jerk and I know I am supposed to pray for him so here I am praying for him.” I have certainly done that. Jesus asks us instead to sincerely pray for them, and sometimes that is hard. If we can’t summon up enough compassion for the person we regard as our enemy, it is sometimes helpful to try to envision them as the child they once were and pray for that child. We were all innocent children at one point in our lives, and that innocent child who deserves love and kindness always lives on in every one of us.

Another way that we can love our enemies is to listen to them. How many times have we seen two people arguing and neither one is listening to the other? Both people are just trying to out-yell each other and nobody is hearing anything except their own yelling. I make it a practice to read and watch news stories from the opposite side of my political point of view so that I can learn. I always ask myself “What do they want?” and “What do they fear?” It’s sometimes surprising to learn that we all want the same things – safety and security – but it is fear that drives some people to seek those things at the expense of others.

Listen. That is the first word of the Rule of St. Benedict. Listen, he says. Listen carefully because it is in listening that we create a sacred space for the feelings and experiences of others, and in that sacred space we can always find healing, diplomacy, peace, and common ground.

Love your God. Love your neighbor. It is not a polite suggestion from God, but a commandment. God tells us that this is the reason we are here. This is the essence of our existence – to form real connections with our fellow human beings and, at long last, to finally learn to take care of each other.

I'd like to close with a quote from a very non-Biblical source, Tennessee Williams:

The world is violent and mercurial — it will have its way with you. We are saved only by love — love for each other and the love that we pour into the art we feel compelled to share: being a parent; being a writer; being a painter; being a friend. We live in a perpetually burning building, and what we must save from it, all the time, is love.”