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How Do We Love Thee?

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

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

41Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42“‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’” They said to him, “The son of David.” 43He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 44‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? 45If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” 46No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

This is the word of the Lord . . .

What amazing psychological / sociological / theological insight and impact in this scripture for today! Is it so simple and clear and yet is very difficult to attain. It really isn't so easy to love yourself, and it isn't easy to love God, and it is NOT easy to love your neighbors, let alone your enemies, as Jesus is quoted as having said in the Luke gospel. Honestly, it seems the most difficult challenge of the human race, is to love.

Have you ever thought about humanity this way? We are born totally trusting creatures. We have to be - because we are totally vulnerable. We cannot even turn ourselves over. And from that moment on we are set to learn how to become independent, which seems to involve a drive to do things ourselves, learning not to expect others to do for us, and learning who we can trust and who we must compete with for attention and self fulfillment. We *have* to be taught not to trust everyone and everything, or we could very easily die. Survival has to do with knowing who and what to trust, and we can never be 100% sure that we will know all the dangers out there.

And after enough embarrassing moments we learn that we cannot even trust ourselves, because we mess up there as well, even when there are times that we know better and do the wrong thing anyway.

Love and trust are intertwined. To love is to be vulnerable, and fear is often equated with vulnerability. Yet we are told in the scriptures that, “perfect love casts out fear.” And in the midst of all this fear and vulnerability and mistrust, we are told that according to these leaders of faith, the greatest thing we can do - perhaps the truest meaning of life - is to love. St. Teresa of Avila wrote, “Let everyone understand that real love of God does not consist in tear-shedding, nor in that sweetness and tenderness for which usually we long, just because they console us, but in serving God in justice, fortitude of the soul and humility.”

We are told to love God, and neighbors and ourselves, and our enemies . . . but then, who or what does that leave out? We might as well claim it all! Our highest calling in life is to love everything. Not that we will ever necessarily get there - but that is the challenge we have in this imperfect often painful world - to struggle to love.

We are all probably by now aware of the cycle, you must love yourself before you can love anything else, but then, when one idolizes one's self there doesn't seem to be room to love others. On the other

hand, if one doesn't like oneself, it is really hard to deal clearly with others because we often find ourselves seeing evil in others that is not there – but is just a reflection of what we see in ourselves. There is a need for some sort of a balance, which is why, when asked to mention the one greatest commandment, Jesus gives two – because they are inseparable.

It is actually a very high spiritual accomplishment to get to the point where you love God, “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” because we have to unlearn so much of our acquired fear. Often we find ourselves automatically turning to God for guidance or requests, even if it to have more love. Meister Eckhart referred to this, he wrote:

Some people want to see God with their eyes as they see a cow, and to love Him as they love their cow- for the milk and cheese and profit it brings them. This is how it is with people who love God for the sake of outward wealth or inward comfort. They do not rightly love God, when they love Him for their own advantage. Indeed, I tell you the truth, *any object* you have in your mind, *however good*, will be a barrier between you and the inmost Truth.

It is in loving God that we can learn to love ourselves and others. It is in loving ourselves and others that we discover we can be strong enough to love God independent of what we believe God can do for us. It is in loving, period, that we can grow and trust into our true selves.

Here is a part of a conversation between a spiritual seeker and a Bishop that was contributed to Francis de Sales, but was believed by some to have actually been written by Jean Pierre Camus:

At last, however, the Bishop said, "There are many besides you who want me to tell them of methods and systems and secret ways of becoming perfect, and I can only tell them that the sole secret is a hearty love of God, and the only way of attaining that love is by loving. You learn to speak by speaking, to study by studying, to run by running, to work by working; and just so you learn to love God and man by loving. All those who think to learn in any other way deceive themselves. If you want to love God, go on loving Him more and more. Begin as a mere apprentice, and the very power of love will lead you on to become a master in the art. Those who have made most progress will continually press on, never believing themselves to have reached their end; for charity should go on increasing until we draw our last breath."

“Charity should go on increasing until we draw our last breath.” Charity is a result, a part, or love. In doing charity, we love.

One of the worlds greatest examples of Charity work is Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and she wrote:

Loving as He loves,
 Helping as He helps,
 Giving as He gives,
 Serving as He serves,
 Rescuing as He rescues,
 Being with Him twenty-four hours,
 Touching Him in his distressing disguise.

Recently I was told that the greatest words in the English vocabulary are these, “Now in Conclusion . . .” So, after a sermon full of such a series of quotes, I will close with words from St. Bernard of Clairvaux:

Love seeks no cause beyond itself and no fruit; it is its own fruit, its own enjoyment. I love because I love; I love in order that I may love.... Of all the motions and affections of the soul, love is the only one by means of which the creature, though not on equal terms, is able to treat with the Creator and to give back something resembling what has been given to it. What God loves, he only desires to be loved, knowing that love will render all those who love Him happy.