

Heart Problems
Psalm 82 and Luke 10:25-37
Elon Community Church, July 15, 2007

Does it seem to you that there is a lot of religious talk going on in the public arena these days? Politicians running for office show up at mega-churches and speak much about God, often in words that are obviously not a part of their usual vocabulary. A socialite emerges from her twenty-three day confinement declaring that she has found God in jail and will be good from now on. Religious programming runs twenty-four hours a day on television, with one preacher after another exhorting a questionable number of viewers he will never see in person.

Talk, talk, talk. Don't you grow weary of those competing claims for absolute truth in more talk and more words? I find myself wondering sometimes, *"What really is the heart of the Christian gospel? What is essential to the message of Jesus and what has accumulated through the years through custom and habit and tradition? It has to be more than talk"*

I want to turn to Jesus today for my answer, and in a word, I am convinced the essential message of the gospel is "love." Not just any kind of love, but a unique kind described by the Greek word, "agape." It is not a sentiment, or an infatuation. It is that quality Jesus said would determine if others knew you as his disciple – *"if you have love for one another."* It is that which Paul called *"a more excellent way,"* and *"the greatest of these."* Someone put it this way: *"Love is deliberate commitment to the well being of others demonstrated in our words and deeds."* It is the most difficult thing Jesus commanded, but it is the most essential thing he shared in his life.

I

According to some of the gospel narratives, this passage from Luke comes as Jesus made his way to Jerusalem for what would be his last days of earthly ministry. He had endured much throughout the past three years, and now it was drawing to a conclusion. There were those who were determined to be rid of him, one way or another. He had not met their expectations as a messiah, and he had challenged many of their pet ideas and theological assumptions.

This section of the gospel shows him facing challenges from two of his most frequent critics. They came to Jesus with entirely different issues, both of which are obviously aimed, not at seeking truth, but in catching the Teacher in an error. The Pharisees and the Sadducees differed on many issues but they both shared a common trait dealing with how to build the religious community into what they believed it ought to be. Both groups were zealous in their efforts. Both had a firm grasp on what they believed. Both were out to prove their way was best. They loved to stand out in the crowds and in public places with a show of their religion. Their problem? They had what I would call "heart problems."

What I mean by that is they were more interested in proving their positions and keeping people who differed out of their midst, than in demonstrating the spirit of God in their dealings with people who were struggling to find meaning in life. And Jesus would have nothing to do with that kind of religious life. His was a heartfelt, heart-changing way of life that the legalistic religionists among the Pharisees and Sadducees could never accept.

Seeing how Jesus handled some of his critics, a Scribe, a teacher of the law, came and asked him a question I have a feeling he was delighted to answer. *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?”* Jesus turned the question back to the expert who already knew the answer. The scribe proudly quoted those wonderful Old Testament words that all of them knew so well. *“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”*

Those were ancient words that were at the heart of all Jewish worship and religious belief. These words are known as the *“Shema,”* and they are the Jewish confession of faith, words repeated by pious Jews every morning and every evening. They are the words that even to this day begin every synagogue experience. Quickly he added another quote from Leviticus in their Hebrew Bible, *“The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

“You have answered well,” Jesus replied. *“Do this and you will live.”* Matthew tells us that Jesus added, *“All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.”* In Mark’s account, He wrapped the whole bundle up with this insight: *“There is no commandment greater than these.”*

Seeing he had dug himself into a hole, the scribe asked another question, “wanting to justify himself,” Luke editorializes. *“Who is my neighbor?”* And Jesus gave him the memorable message of a “good Samaritan,” one who lived out his faith in compassionate service to a man in need.

II

Up to this point most of us have probably been saying, “Right on! Amen! Jesus, you really told them!” But it is never easy to flesh out that challenge of Jesus that makes love of God and love our neighbor the heart of his message. Our own “heart problems” begin to kick in when we seek to apply the truth. Our prejudices handicap us, our busy schedules give us ample excuses, our political and religious dogmas insulate us, and this challenge to love others files in the face of conventional wisdom. In the process we miss the opportunities for demonstrating the spirit of Jesus.

Think with me this morning about how you and I love God *with “all our heart, soul, mind and strength,”* and our *“neighbor as ourselves.”* This is not something we just talk about. It is a call to respond in concrete ways of loving action.

Let me personalize this message for a moment. Nine months ago Gayle and I made some rather dramatic transitions in our lives. We made the decision to pull up our roots of nearly thirty years in Richmond, leaving friends, connections, a church we loved and rich experiences that we cherished. In the process we had already determined to leave a denomination which had shaped our spiritual journey all our lives, but which we could no longer embrace. This was a denomination that had nurtured us, educated us in college and seminary, and given us opportunities in ministry for forty-five years. But we felt we had to leave it. So last October we came to live in Burlington to start over. We came with a bit of grief over all these changes in our lives. All those changes are not easy!

May I tell you what has eased our transition more than just about anything else? It was walking in the doors of this sanctuary and experiencing a gracious welcome, a sense of acceptance in spite of our different paths in the past, and the compassion of some sensitive people who realized that we were experiencing some challenges of adjustment. On our first visit here many of you reached out in simple, but profound ways. Our pastor was gracious and inclusive, people called, and we were never made to feel we were strangers.

Our story may not seem to raise a very dramatic need, but it speaks to me of a reality we all need to remember. You never know fully what is going on with those who walk in these doors on a Sunday, or those with whom you work or learn or sit across from at any given moment. Many of them have been battered and beaten by difficult experiences, cut off by careless words and left hopeless by shallow religious experiences. So many carry such heavy loads and desperately need a loving touch. Many of you could tell your personal stories of the times when simple gestures of grace were extended to you when you needed it so much.

What power there is in compassion! And yet how reluctant we are to put it to work. It is not difficult to see needs, but it is challenging business! I will repeat, this is the most difficult thing Jesus ever commanded, and yet it is so much the heart of his life and message.

Consider this experience that I read recently. Nancy Ortberg is a Presbyterian pastor in California who challenged her congregation with a sermon entitled "Jesus and Your Job." Before entering ministry she had been an emergency room nurse. She tells of finishing her shift after a particularly difficult night. An older doctor was debriefing a new doctor who had done a respectable job that night, telling him what he had done well and what could have been done differently.

Then the older physician put his hand on the shoulder of the younger man and said, "When you finished, did you notice the young man from housekeeping who came in to clean the room?" There was silence and blank look on the young doctor's face.

The older man continued, "His name is Carlos. He's been here for three years. He does a fabulous job. When he comes in he gets the room turned around so fast that

you and can get our next patients quickly. His wife's name is Maria. They have four children. Then he named each of the four children and gave their age." He continued, to the astonishment of all who listened. "He lives in a rented house about three blocks from the hospital. They've been up here from Mexico for about five years. His name is Carlos," the older man repeated. "Next week I would like you to tell me something about Carlos that I don't already know. Okay? Now let's go check the rest of the patients."

Compassion takes that kind of time and attention, you know. In that beautiful parable of Jesus a priest and a Levite couldn't take the time for it. A Samaritan did.

As I approach the 50th anniversary of my ordination to ministry, I find myself with a decidedly different frame of mind these days from that steamy July day in 1957 when I knelt for hands to be laid on my head. I believe a lot less in the fallible wisdom of denominations and the creeds of men and women who seek to define every application of that faith. At best those organizations and statements are merely the groping of limited minds for some way to control the events of a shaky world. At worst, those statements and organizations are efforts to exclude from the grace of God people who are not like us and who may seem like a threat to us.

But I keep hearing Jesus saying simply, clearly, with compassion, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...mind...strength; and your neighbor as yourself.*"

Consider this from Henri Nouwen, one of the great Christian voices of the 20th century:

"We are not sent to the world to judge, to condemn, to evaluate, to classify, or to label. When we walk around as if we have to make up our minds about people and tell them what is wrong with them and how they should change, we only create more division. Jesus says it clearly, "be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge...do not condemn...forgive." (Luke 6:36-37)

In a world that constantly asks us to make up our minds about other people, a nonjudgmental presence seems nearly impossible. But it is one of the most beautiful fruits of a deep spiritual life and will be easily recognized by those who long for reconciliation." (Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*)

I repeat, this is Jesus' most difficult teaching. To live that kind of love may not get you accolades of appreciation, or even a thank you in return. Indeed it may lead you to be resented or ignored as impractical and idealistic. It may lead you to a cross of misunderstanding, isolation and pain. That is what it did for Jesus. But if it does, know this. You will be kept in the sustaining arms of a loving God who will keep you in his care.

Love God with everything you have....love your neighbor as yourself....that is the heart of the matter. Amen.