CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Love Your Neighbor

This morning, I'd like us to feel the force of this first lesson. You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy. To answer a lawyer's question about which commandment is the greatest, Jesus quotes from the 19th chapter of Leviticus. And as we strive to love our neighbors as ourselves, it is worth considering the context for our Lord's teaching.

"You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy. You shall not render an unjust judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great. With justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor. I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin. You shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

We need to ponder these words. We live in a world that's still at war. We live in a world where we still slander one another, where we still judge one another unjustly and profit from each other's blood. Beloved, we are a violent and stiff-necked people. We are all children of Cain. And so, in all times and places, we need to hear God's call to holiness. But at the same time, we dare not ever forget the truth of the gospel. For God's love comes to us as a gift.

God gives us love regardless of how we respond. And there is nothing we can do, nothing we can do to make God love us any more or any less. One of the 20th century's great spiritual teachers, Thomas Merton, once wrote that the surest sign that we have received a spiritual understanding of God's love for us is an appreciation of our own poverty in light of God's infinite mercy. He went on to say that we must love the poverty of others as Jesus loves it. We must see them with the eyes of his own compassion, but we cannot have true compassion for others unless we are willing to accept mercy and receive forgiveness for our sins.

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Although he was a monk with a life very different from ours, who spent much of his time in silence and bodily discipline, Merton was well acquainted with the things of this world. He tried to bring the whole world to God in prayer. He acknowledged his own spiritual poverty as a sinner whom God loves. And most importantly, he saw other people in the light of Jesus and carried us to God in prayer.

Now, some of you may have noticed that I have a few tattoos. In fact, I have complete sleeves, and one of them on my right arm is the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is an old, old symbol of Jesus and His love. Unlike many pictures of that heart, this one is very realistic. The artist I worked with did exactly what I wanted her to do. In fact, it looks like something out of an anatomy textbook. You can see the arch of the aorta and some of the other major vessels. My friends have even called it gruesome. Like traditional images of the Sacred Heart, this one has a crown of thorns wrapped around it. It's meant to remind us of the suffering and death of Jesus. It also has flames shooting out of the top, which points us to the Holy Spirit, the living flame of love, the source of faith, hope, and charity. Indeed, that same spirit burns inside all of us.

Paul says it in the fifth chapter of Romans, "The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that's been given to us." Devotion to the Sacred Heart has long been associated with the Jesuits. They used it all over the world to teach people about Jesus and his humanity. Even though it has its origins in the first Christian centuries, and especially the Gospel of John, the modern form of this devotion was developed by a seventeenth century nun. Like most Christian symbols, including many here at Christ Church, Cranbrook, the Sacred Heart is meant to convey the truth and beauty of God in a concrete image so that we can pray with it and be changed by what we see there. It's one of the many ways that the Christian faith was taught in the Middle Ages, and it wasn't just because many of the faithful couldn't read.

The Sacred Heart is meant to point us beyond head knowledge of Jesus to a real relationship where we trust and love and follow him. St. Gregory the Great put it this way, "Love itself is a form of knowledge." The most important way we know Jesus is through our love. Loving God, being in relationship with Jesus, self-giving love and communion, that's what our faith is all about.

For Christians, God is love. God simply is the love that exists in and among the persons of the Trinity. God is the ecstatic, other-centered love of Jesus poured out for the life of the world. And for me, it's important to portray his heart realistically as a testimony to his real human flesh. Jesus meets us where we are.

That's what we mean by the incarnation. God joining us in a real human life. The Son of God coming to join us in our struggles and to triumph in our flesh. That's what it's all about. Jesus breaking down the walls that divide human beings, setting us free to love each other. That's what it's all about In the Passion according to John, blood and water flow from his heart. They fill the sacraments and the preaching of the gospel with their life-giving power. It's worth comparing Rock of Ages, maybe you know it, that great 18th-century evangelical hymn. "Let the water and the blood, from thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power."

Water and blood are signs to us of the death of Jesus. They are tokens of his labor on the cross by which we are reborn. For as the Fathers of the Church have taught, we are taken from the wounded side of Christ, just as Eve was taken from Adam. We are God's new creation, and the Lord Jesus is our mother, our friend, and our Savior. We've been born again in Him. And in His heart, pierced on the cross, we find the living center of God's new humanity. We find room in His heart for all of us. The heart is where we meet God. It is the fountain of love and mercy which never run out. In the flesh of Jesus, God is making all things new. Hearts imply love, and love is central to the vision of Jesus.

Love is the meaning of His teaching. It's the whole point of His ministry. Our presiding bishop a few years ago, Michael Curry, used to say, "If it's not about love, it's not about God." If you want to know who God is, look at Jesus. You will see Him loving every last person He meets. Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law, all the law and the prophets." It isn't easy to love other people. We can be so ugly and violent with each other. People share stories like that with me all the time. It is part of the human condition. It happens in our families and schools, it happens in our workplaces, it happens in our streets and on battlefields around the world. Too often we show contempt for our neighbors, especially those we perceive as different.

Having a child with special needs has driven this home point-- this point home for me. We have seen other people looking at our son with pity, sometimes with revulsion or fear. Through Danny, we get to relive the wounds of our childhoods. We get to experience the cruelty of other people and doubt whether we belong. By the time we are adults, most of us have been hurt in one way or another, and we can use our pain to fuel anger and resentment. So we go out and hurt other people or maybe ourselves,

or else we can let our wounds become sources of compassion. That's the way of Jesus and all the saints. We can use our wounds to connect with other people. Or, as Paul once put it, we can bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.

This week at our Thursday night Bible study, some of you were there; we had the opportunity to put this teaching into practice. A woman came in that none of us knew, and she sat at one of the tables. Shirley Green noticed that she seemed to be lost, and she said something to me. And so I walked over to her, and I took this sister of ours to the woman's AA meeting that was going on in St. Dunstan's Chapel. And as I was walking her over there, she told me that it was her very first in-person meeting.

She was newly sober, and all her other meetings had been online. It was a brave and important thing for her to do. When we got to St. Dunstan's, there were about fifteen women or so in there already, sitting in a circle in a safe and holy place, finding new life by sharing their stories and surrendering to the God of their understanding. Sure, showing her the way interrupted our class for a few minutes. We could have seen this as an inconvenience, and maybe some of us were tempted to do so. But as I told the class, getting our sister to that meeting was likely the most important thing our church did that day. Whenever we are offered a choice, God is always calling us to put the love of Jesus into practice.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself One of those commandments that the whole law and all the prophets depends on. The love of Jesus isn't merely sentimental. In fact, it is the most practical, down-to-earth thing there is. It can change the world. We've seen it. Loving our neighbors is difficult, life-changing work. The church is a school of love. People are learning God's love here. We are one another's teachers in the ways of love. God sends us Jesus to set us free and to show us how to love. Here at the altar, all over this building, all over this community, in everything we do, Jesus is uniting us together as one body.

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Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself. It is so easy to describe, but it's very hard to do. Love involves giving up any sense of our own purity. It means coming to God

empty-handed with a wide-open heart. It means putting others first. Often, it means letting their needs come before our own. It means following Jesus wherever he leads and letting him show us the way. You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.