

Not so easy rule of life

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, October 29, 2017.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.
Leviticus 19:18

Jesus has a way of getting directly to the essentials in his teaching. When the experts in the law ask him which of all the laws is the greatest, he quotes from Deuteronomy, (6:4) "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." He then takes another quote, this time from the book of Leviticus, (19:18) "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." To love God and to love and respect our neighbor are the two great commandments that form the basis of order in all human relationships.

That's it. Love God and love your neighbor. It seems so simple. The challenge is to live out these simple precepts. What does it mean to love God? Who is my neighbor and do I have to love everyone? Why should I have to love those who are so obnoxious? Why is such a basic yet profound concept so challenging for us to put into practice?

Abraham Lincoln had little formal education, yet he had an extensive knowledge of the Bible because children in his time learned to read from the family Bible as one of the few books in the home. Though he is believed to be a religious man, he never formally joined a church because he thought that most church membership requirements were too complex. He said that he would join the church whose sole requirement for membership was to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Loving God with our whole heart, mind and soul reaches to the very heart of our being. Loving and respecting our neighbor begins with having respect for ourselves. Loving and liking is not the same. It is not possible to like everyone nor is it possible for everyone to like us. We can learn to love and respect our neighbor with the realization that he or she has all the same human needs and feelings as we have. It helps to remember that God loves those whom we cannot stand in the same way that God loves each and every one of us, especially when we are not behaving at our worst.

The humorist Mark Twain pointed out the importance of practicing what we believe in the story of a man who wanted to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land where he would climb Mount Sinai and read aloud the Ten Commandments. Twain's response was that it would be better for him to stay home and keep them.

We struggle to know God as much trying to know our neighbor. Our neighbor can be our parent or sibling or child with whom we at times find it difficult to have a civil word. Our neighbor is our spouse or partner we take for granted and neglect to spend quality time together. Our neighbor is one with intense religious convictions and is confident that he is going to heaven but is inappropriate in his behavior with women. Our neighbor is the stranger who lives on the street with no place to go who would never choose to live that way. There is a story of a Hollywood actress who suffered from a severe mental breakdown and found herself wandering aimlessly in the streets. When other homeless people took her into their makeshift shelter and gave her a blanket to keep warm, she told them that she didn't belong there. Their response was, "Neither do we."

Our neighbor can be loved no matter how unlikeable they are. They deserve every consideration we would want for ourselves because we all belong to the same human race with the same human needs. If we are to treat other people the way we want to be treated, we have to rise above our differences with respect to our common humanity.

Christianity attempts to confront the questions of real life issues. Christianity may not have all the answers, but it helps us to live with the questions. In the final analysis, the Christian faith offers meaning for our lives by placing our trust in God when we have trouble making sense living with turmoil, tension and uncertainty. What sustains me is living with the mystery of what I don't understand. It is important to ask the right questions in the hope of living into the answers.

Vaclav Havel, a writer and dissident, was the first President of the Czech Republic. He wrote that while we all believe in freedom, democracy, justice, human rights and saving the world from nuclear disaster, we are primarily concerned with what best serves our own personal concerns. The best place to begin facing the bigger issues is within our own inner concerns. (Letters to Olga)

Dorothy Day, a journalist, social activist and key figure in the Catholic Worker Movement, wrote that when we love most intensely and most humanly we recognize how tepid is our love for others. She wrote that when we genuinely love people, we see all the good in them and all the Christ in them. If God can see Christ in us, we should be able to see Christ in others. (The Reckless Way of Love)

Our neighbors are the men and women we see in the streets of Boston holding a sign asking for help. They are the people we see in the news who live in unspeakable conditions half a world away. Whenever and wherever we treat a stranger as our brother or sister, we come closer to the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The goal for all of us is to have our capacity to love and care for other people so complete and without reservation that it is second nature to us. We can have a better world when we develop the capacity to practice that very simple but profound concept of love that knows no bounds.