

How We Love  
November 1, 2015  
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I am going to say, right off the bat, that I have a problem with the Greatest Commandment. That's the one that lays down the law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" and soul and strength and mind. It is the great commandment of Judaism and Christianity, based on the ancient teachings of Moses that are re-affirmed by Jesus. It should call forth pious and devout thoughts. But, instead, it makes me wonder.

If I am honest, it is impossible for me to love God with all my heart. Big chunks of my heart have already been given away. I mean, big chunks – to my husband, my children, my sisters, my cousins, my friends. And my strength? I use some of my strength loving God, I suppose, but lots more doing yard work and taking walks. And my mind? Yes, I do express my love of God through reading and study and writing. But my mind is busy so often with plans and ideas and games and activities that seem to have very little to do with God. And my soul? Well, I guess God can have that part of me, because I don't know what else to do with it.

I am being a little facetious, but I am also trying to take Jesus and our ancient traditions seriously. How can I, how can we, love in a way that at least honors God? What semantic and mental gymnastics will I have to do to understand **how** we can love God so completely?

Some people might say, "Look for some examples of people who have lived out the Great Commandment, and then try to emulate them." One word for such a person is "saint" – but that is one of those loaded words whose meaning varies with the speaker. In one sense, it refers to those who have been canonized by a church body, especially in the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox traditions. One person's saints might be another person's villain. Recently, Pope Francis canonized the 18th-century Spanish missionary Junipero Serra as a saint. For some Latinos, this was an affirming recognition of one of their own who had founded the first nine of twenty-one Spanish missions from San Diego to San Francisco. But some Native Americans were horrified. For them, Serra represented the genocidal abuses of the Spanish *conquistadors*. "We're stunned and we're in disbelief," said one. "We believe saints are supposed to be people who followed in the life of Jesus Christ and the words of Jesus Christ. There was no Jesus Christ lifestyle at the missions." So maybe we need to look elsewhere to see where love of God shows up.

When we turn to Scripture, we get a different picture of "saints." The word shows up in the Old Testament, referring to God's chosen people, the holy ones. In the New Testament "saints" appear 62 times. Paul used it 44 times in his letters to refer to the gathered Christian community, those alive and well, those struggling and limping to the Kingdom of God. In his world, a saint was a baptized Christian, beloved by God, made holy by association with the Holy Spirit and allegiance to Jesus. No mention of perfect piety, strange miracles, or brutal execution. We are saintly because we belong to God.

And yet, we look for more content, more inspiration, more striving from our saints. When we turn to our Gospel reading, we get another angle on what it might mean to be a saint. This happens through a conversation Jesus has with “one of the scribes,” one of those people who has been challenging Jesus about his teachings. The surprise here is that they actually agree: the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor is their point of contact. (By the way the shock of this friendly conversation might be a lesson in constructive dialogue for all of us.) Not only did the scribe agree, but he makes a significant value judgment. He says that living out the Great Commandment is worth more than outward displays of piety, purity, and sacrifice. As the prophet Hosea would say, “God desires mercy, not sacrifice.” This is the real point of contact with Jesus: the point at which he says to the scribe: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” It’s just possible that the scribe was on his way to sainthood.

You might say that all our contemporary social justice initiatives have their basis in the love commandments that Jesus links in this passage. Maybe elevating and including the command to love the neighbor is a gift to us, a signpost, a clue on how to love God. Each attempt to feed the hungry, to lift the poor out of poverty, to soothe the distressed, embodies this commandment to love God and neighbor, in whatever partial or fragmented way, are making the presence of God on earth visible. They are examples or displays of holiness, not because of their own innate virtues, but because they have allowed this commandment to bear fruit in action. We may call the saints or we may call them heroes or we may call them inspirations. They have been obscured with centuries of myth and they have lived within our own lifetimes. Today is a good day to remember those who have gone before us, on whose shoulders we stand, so to speak, the ones who draw us closer to the kingdom through their lives and their witness.

The poet Mary Oliver, who manages to arrange together so beautifully words that speak the life of the our senses and the life of the Spirit, says this about loving your neighbor as yourself: “Christianity is profoundly counterintuitive -- ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’ -- which I think properly understood means your neighbor is as worthy of love as you are, not that you’re actually going to be capable of this sort of superhuman feat. But you’re supposed to run against the grain. It’s supposed to be difficult. It’s supposed to be a challenge.”

You might say that Christians are called to love for a living. If that is so, we cannot glamorize a commandment that should be not only difficult, but counter-cultural. The calling for Christians is to build a community based on love. But, as George MacLeod said, “Only a demanding task makes for Community.” Jesus never asked for what is easily or quickly done.

Yes, I have a problem with the greatest commandment. It is hard. It is impossible. But maybe it begins to teach me something. It gives me glimpses of how my loves can be signposts to other possibilities of loving. If I can extrapolate a bit – if I know parental love, or the love of family and friends, if I know the infinite **worth** of those in my narrow circle – then I can begin to stretch out my heart and mind and strength and soul. Knowing that this is a pathway to love of God, a journey that other saints, others in the cloud of witnesses have taken – if I stretch out my hand, I might clasp the hand of a neighbor, and begin to find my way.

Madeleine L’Engle tells a story in her book, [A Stone for a Pillow](#): A good man dies and goes to heaven, and is welcomed at the pearly gates, which are thrown open for him to enter. He goes through them in a daze of bliss, because it is everything he has been taught, golden streets, milk and alabaster and honey and golden harps. He wanders the streets lost in

happiness, until after a while he realizes that he is all alone; he hasn't seen anybody at all. He walks and walks, and he sees nobody.

So he goes back to the gates, and he asks, "Peter?"

"Yes, my son?"

"This really is heaven?"

"Oh, yes, my son. Don't you like it?"

"Oh, it's just wonderful! But where is everybody? Where are the prophets? Where is the Holy Family? Where are the saints?"

Peter looks at him kindly. "Oh, them? They're all down in hell, ministering to the damned. If you'd like to join them, I'll show you the way."

Amen.