

Sermon for Proper 10, Year C
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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In the early sixth century, St. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in northern Africa, wrote: “Love, and do what you will.” Now St. Augustine was speaking in a particular context, and his words have been twisted by all kinds of people to justify all kinds of things that St. Augustine would never have condoned. Still, even at the time, it was a provocative statement. But I think it was a true statement. It just didn’t really get anybody off the hook. Neither did St. Augustine mean it to get anyone off the hook.

What I think he meant by “Love, and do what you will.” is that as long as you truly love God and truly love your neighbor, your desires will naturally be God’s desires. Your will and his will naturally be one. And if you want what God wants, then you should do whatever you want.

St. Augustine’s aphorism is just an even shorter way of saying the summary of the Law. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all you mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” We hear this at almost every Mass, although we usually use the version from Matthew, which is worded slightly differently. If it’s important enough to use every Sunday, maybe we should think about this a little.

All your heart, all your soul, all your strength, all your mind. Is there anything left? I don’t think so. We are to love God with our whole being. There should be nothing left that isn’t going into loving God. That is the requirement of the Law. And as we love God with our whole being, we will have his love for others. Have you ever noticed that you take on the loves and hates of the people you love? If Jenny loves someone, I want to love him too, even if I don’t understand why she loves the person. So it is with us and God. If we love him, we will want to love what he loves and hate what he hates. And it turns out that God loves everybody and everything, except sin.

Keep in mind that this is from the Old Testament. Not only is it from the Old Testament, it’s from the Law, the *Torah*. It is one little verse buried in Deuteronomy banged together with one little part of a verse buried in Leviticus. But it wasn’t a new and different way of summarizing the Law. The conversation here is between two students of the Law, trained in the same tradition. The lawyer doesn’t give an answer that Jesus doesn’t expect. In fact, in the other versions of this story in Matthew and Mark, it’s Jesus himself who answers the question, rather than the questioner. It’s a standard answer.

The problem is that people don't do it. And people have excuses for not doing it. The questioner here has a ready answer for not obeying the law. "He, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" Now, I have a little advice for you. I've gained it over many years of studying the Gospel accounts, and I think it holds true for today. *Never* try to justify yourself to Jesus. Most likely, he'll tell a little story that turns the tables on you and embarrasses you in front of the rest of the crowd. He's just too good at this game. Don't even try it.

In this case, Jesus tells the parable we usually know as the story of the Good Samaritan. Notice that the priest and the Levite who pass by and don't help the injured man are pillars, not only of society, but of the religious community. They are the representatives of the Law. And they do not fulfill the Law. It is the Samaritan, that half-breed heretic, who fulfills the Law. Also notice that Jesus does not condone the heresy held by the folk in Samaria. People up there are seriously confused in their theology. But that's not what Jesus is talking about. The point is that what's right is right and what's wrong is wrong, no matter who does it, no matter to whom it's done. And the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" is simply a dodge.

Now I want you to listen very carefully to what I have to say next, because I am about to explode everything you were probably taught in Sunday School about this parable. Your Sunday School teachers told you (at least mine did) that this story is Jesus' way of teaching us to be helpful to our fellow man and to perform corporal acts of mercy. But what I want you to see is that this story *assumes* that those are good things to do. Jesus doesn't have to teach that, because even his opponents already know it. So your Sunday School teachers weren't wrong that those are good things to do, or that the church should be in the business of helping people. What they didn't see was the connection between that and the summary of the Law.

It's not a story about caring for the needy. It's a story about loving God and our neighbor. The reason the priest and the Levite don't stop to help the man on the side of the road is that they have no love. They don't love the man. They are probably icons of virtue in their own worlds. They probably volunteer in their local food pantry or soup kitchen. But they don't love the man that is right in front of them. They have grown cold, doing things by rote, doing things that are predictable and safe, doing things that are convenient and respectable.

And if they don't love the man that God has put right in front of them, then they don't love God either. Their entire service in the temple, teaching the Law, leading worship, is a lie. The Law is summed up by loving God with everything you've got and loving others with his love. These men can't even do the obviously decent thing and help out a wounded man. Even a Samaritan knows better than

that. These men are blasphemers. Or to put it another way: Their love has grown cold.

Contrast that with the cry of David from the heart: “Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long. ... All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.” Contrast it with St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.”

Our love for God is the engine that drives our righteousness, or it is no righteousness. And God is so easy to love! He loved us first. And he is so amazing; the creator of all that is, the redeemer of the world he created, the lover of us all; light, and life, and truth, and beauty.

We just have to let go of our selves.