

MATTHEW 22:34-46-LOVE COMMANDMENTS in time of Covid-19

Assuming that all of you need a laugh as much as I do, let me begin with a light-hearted story involving a Pastor that wasn't me. There was once a Pastor of a church who looked outside her office window and was pleased to see that new sidewalk was being laid. The concrete was being poured, smooth and seamless, along the front of the church, and it gladdened her heart. But then she saw some of the children of her parish come, as children will do, and start to draw and step in the still fresh sidewalk, leaving their mark forever, or until the City laid new sidewalks again, whichever came first. So, she ran out of her office and chastised the children, chasing them off and away. A sweet elderly gentleman who lived next door to the church witnessed what happened, and he said to his Pastor, "Pastor, I thought you told us we ought to love the children of our parish." She replied, "I do love our children-- in the *abstract*, but *not* in the concrete." Har-har. Get it? This feeble joke reminds me of a colleague who was fond of proclaiming, "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand." So much easier to love in the abstract than in the concrete, isn't it? The Great Commandment, in this morning's gospel lesson, presents us with this very challenge. We are to love God with all our being; and we are to love our neighbor as yourself. Not love in the abstract, but love in the concrete, in real and intentional ways that matter. Loving God is always paramount for Christians, but given our current circumstances, I'm going to instead focus on the second aspect of the Great Commandment, that of loving our neighbor as ourselves. Yet even that commandment includes two facets, doesn't it? It presumes that we love *ourselves* well and intelligently

enough, to make loving our neighbor in the same way a good idea. In this time of stress, practicing healthy self love as well as neighborly love is essential.

And it is a time of stress, isn't it? The roller coaster ride I have been on emotionally this past week could rival any theme park's most spectacular attraction, and I am guessing that's true for most of us. We are living in a time of crisis, and we're not used to it, and we don't like it. This Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented in any of our experiences. Suddenly the world, our community, our church, our friends and family, ourselves, all seem a source of contagion and peril; we are fighting a foe we can't see and whose actions are unpredictable, and it is a foe that threatens us all, although the peril is greater for some more than others, depending on age, underlying health concerns, and so on. The necessary effort to contain the pandemic is having a huge domino effect on the economy, on schools, on churches and all community gatherings, on families and households. Every day, sometimes every hour, the current picture changes in ways that are usually ever more concerning, and the uncertainty as to how long this situation will last, how it will play out, and what it will all mean, is enormous. And given that all of us are only human, we are experiencing emotional and psychological whiplash on a nearly regular basis. In the opportunities I've had to communicate with others, the following feelings have been noted: *Grief*—we keep losing one source of emotional closeness or fun or community support or sense of security after another. It's loss after loss. We are sad. Then there's *Anger*—we aren't in control. Others are imposing restrictions on us. We hear conflicting information and reports. We become irritable and frustrated. Of course there's *Guilt*—were we nationally or individually too slow in our response? Have

we already unwittingly made the situation worse? And without a doubt, there's *Fear*. Fear, anxiety, stress, confusion. These are the kind of companions that keep you awake at night or cause you start each day off with tears or leave you utterly spent by late afternoon. We feel isolated, endangered, and the future looks grim. This is a rich and dark mix of emotions for most of us.

And that's where it might not hurt to consider what is involved in loving ourselves wisely and well, as Jesus' commandment asks us to do. Not in a selfish or egotistical way; just wise and good love for ourselves, valuing ourselves as God's treasured creations, stewarding our own health, resources and well-being as best we can. Because if we fail to do that, it's quite unlikely we will succeed in loving God or our neighbor wisely and well. And in these circumstances, I'm thinking that loving ourselves well means recognizing that we are under unique and significant strain. Loving ourselves means being honest about naming and recognizing how that strain impacts us, because all of us are different in how we respond to stress. Loving ourselves means being patient with ourselves, tolerant of our emotional reactions, realistic in what we can expect of ourselves, and welcoming the truth of humility that it's not all about us, and we can't fix it single-handedly. In a positive manner, loving ourselves wisely means figuring out some strategies to encourage ourselves. What can you do to help yourself keep perspective, to build resilience, to stay well in every sense of the word? What concrete steps can you take on your behalf? I'm not going to repeat the endless injunctions we already know about washing our hands and physical distancing and so on, but rather focus on other areas. My personal self-care list has three daily essentials that I observe literally every

day unless prevented: prayer, exercise, and journaling. I consider my morning devotion time, my need to exercise-- preferably outside, but inside if need be--, and a brief journaling of day's experience to be fundamental in how I cope under normal circumstances, to say nothing about under exceptional circumstances. Additionally, I really value feeling connected to people, savoring a good cup of tea, and either reading or watching something diverting. And if my list sounds way off to you, I'm not surprised or offended, we all have very different needs. Your list might include social interaction however that can happen now, or working with your hands to create something, or a long woods walk in solitude or with others as appropriate, or watching every funny movie you can lay your hands on, or making phone calls to friends, doubling down on reading Scripture or prayer time, or coloring on your computer or in a book, or doing crossword puzzles or jigsaw puzzles, there are countless ways we all have to take care of ourselves. Frankly and sadly, some of our favorites may be unavailable right now---going to church. Going to a restaurant. Going to a movie or the mall. Getting together in gatherings. There is much to grieve, absolutely. And some of our impulse go-to methods for coping may be unwise if they involve overindulgence with alcohol, other drugs, too much food, too much news or social media, and those ways we must do our best to avoid. And yet, there are ways and things we can do to practice wise self-love right now that will make us better people to live with, better people to love our neighbor, the second aspect of this concrete commandment.

. And here is where we might find that it is indeed easier to love people in the abstract than in the concrete, regardless of whether or not they're messing around in a

newly laid sidewalk. As of March 21, I have lived 60 years on this earth and some of you have lived more and some have lived less. Regardless, in our years on this planet, we have had many opportunities to learn what genuine love, love in the concrete, looks like. The longer we live, the more opportunities we have to receive and give love, and that is why some of the most wonderfully loving people among us are the oldest among us. The thing about the present time is that it seems we are called to love our neighbors a little differently than usual, and that's worth some consideration. Whereas loving our neighbors very often involves being with them in groups of varying sizes for purposes of fun, communication or assistance, now loving our neighbors means avoiding those very gatherings. For many of us, that's really difficult. It means giving up what normally gives us pleasure, satisfaction, and a sense of purpose. And yet doing whatever we can to flatten the curve of this pandemic IS loving our neighbor right here and now, in a concrete way that can make a difference. It feels awkward and not right or normal, but within our present situation, loving our neighbors tends to mean seeing less of them, or connecting with them differently, or keeping our distance from them.

And yet there are still positive and life-giving affirmative actions we can take to love our neighbor in a concrete way. We can keep in touch in safe ways. We can call, text, facebook, message, send notes, meet in very small groups with respectful distances among us, or what have you. And we should do so, because that is a vital life line for most of humanity. We should be particularly aware of those who may live alone or be vulnerable right now within our neighborhood and community. Perhaps we might take it upon ourselves to make a point of calling one person a day we might not otherwise think

to do or who might not otherwise get a call or have contact. Perhaps we might pick up groceries or essentials for those whose vulnerability makes them fearful to leave their homes. Perhaps we might make sure to financially support organizations, small businesses, and situations where huge financial hardship is now present. And without a doubt we should be praying for those on the front lines---those in the health care industry, those working in nursing homes, hospitals, clinics, prisons, grocery stores, emergency services; people performing critical functions who may not easily have the option to stay home and feel secure. Government and health officials, leaders of all kinds, all desperately need our prayers and support in whatever form we can offer them. Love of our neighbor in a concrete way may seem a little strange to us right now, but it is still our calling and still very much within our ability.

I think it's fair to say that we are collectively experiencing a true Lent this year, much more than any of us would have wanted to experience. Lent is traditionally a more reflective and serious season; a time when prayer, devotional practices, and study are lifted up; and time when acts of self denial or self sacrifice have traditionally been practiced. I'm guessing many of us have prayed more frequently and intensely as of late and have been practicing self-denial or self-sacrifice whether we hoped to do so or not. Yet recognizing that all that we are doing is in fact a part of loving ourselves, our neighbors, and our Lord does help, I believe. Knowing that we are making a difference through what we are giving up or what we are taking on can bring hope and meaning into this time of challenge. And knowing that the days of Lent and the cross of Good Friday always lead to the empty tomb and our Risen Lord also brings hope and meaning into our

present. I chose the verses from 2nd Timothy this morning, because I think the final verse of that reading is so inspiring: “for God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” God doesn’t will fear for us; God wills and gives to us a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline. Which means we are not alone; we are still in our loving relationships with God, with each others, and with neighbors everywhere; and we are empowered by God’s Spirit to over come fear, practice the self-discipline that is needed, and love ourselves and our neighbors in concrete ways that make all the difference. As we move through this season in our lives and this season of Lent, remember this: Christ’s death on the cross leads to Christ’s resurrection. And that resurrection is the final answer to sin, death, and the devil. Because in the resurrection, we see plainly: love wins. Not *abstract* love, but love in the *concrete*, love that has endured suffering and death. That’s the kind of love God has for us, and the kind of love we return to God and share with others. Love wins. Amen.