

21st Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 25 – Year A – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 10.25.20

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18, Psalm 1, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22: 15-22

“...one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Lawyers have always had the reputation for asking the hard questions. Of all of the commandments and instructions given by God through Moses and the prophets, which is the greatest? If I can follow only one which should it be?

Jesus wasn't quite able to restrict himself to only one great commandment, he needed to summarize all the law and the prophets into two equally important commandments. The two equally important commandments are love God, love neighbor and represent the two halves of ourselves.

Think for a moment of the ocean as an environment. If you have ever been snorkeling you know the vast community that exists below the surface. You also know that you are surrounded and upheld by the water and your own buoyancy.

Loving God is like the waters of the ocean. The love we have for God is because God first loved us and because God always returns our love. We are surrounded and upheld by this love which we give and receive. Loving neighbor, on the other hand, is like the unseen community of life beneath the surface. Whatever we do, intentionally or not, we exert power over the environment and community, our neighbors.

I want to tell you two stories, or real people who had real and life changing experiences of loving God and loving neighbor. The first is about Janet.

I first encountered Janet when she came to church. She was not a regular church goer, nor had she been raised in any church. She was curious and something drew her to us. Janet had had a “hard” life. She had been married, divorced and in the course of the divorce became impoverished. She did not have much in the way of training or job experience. But that did not stop Janet. She became a bus driver. She was a very good bus driver, safe, courteous and well-liked by those who regularly rode her route.

She came to the church to explore what this thing called Christianity was all about. The parish embraced her. She became a member of the Altar Guild and began to learn about Christianity and faith in God. Things were looking up and she was feeling secure.

And then it happened, she was diagnosed with cancer, a kind of cancer for which treatment made her very sick. She used all of her sick leave and vacation and then was fired from her job. Which, of course, meant no health insurance and no income. Janet did an amazing thing in the course of this disaster. She decided to test God in a very unusual way. She would trust God to provide.

And so what Janet did was decide to tithe. To give 10% off the top of any money that came her way. When she told me this story a bit later in her journey I must admit that I was speechless. She saw it as a test of God, I saw it as amazing faith the faith to which we are all called.

Janet used the envelope system. She operated pretty much on a cash basis, so whatever income came to her, she first put 10% into the envelope marked "tithe". Then she distributed the rest into various other envelopes, rent, utilities, food, etc. Janet told me that there was always enough to cover expenses. Sometimes it was a near run thing, but if she continued to put the first money giving back to God, God provided for the rest. She did not say that it wasn't hard, sometimes scary, a bit nerve racking, but it also brought her a deep peace and confidence. Janet loved God enough to trust that God's love would provide for her.

The second story is of Russ and Loris, a story about loving one's neighbor and what it sometime takes to get there. Russ, when I met him, was a police detective. He and his wife, Loris were members of the congregation. When Russ and Loris first met, he was a single man who was a "jock" and loved every kind of sporting event and activity you could think of. He was not a church goer. Loris was a single mom, who had deep faith and expressed it in practical ways.

Russ had season tickets to the Huskey football games. It was the era of Don James, and these tickets were prized and not inexpensive. When Loris and Russ began to discuss marriage, Loris made it clear that her church was important to her and she expected Russ to be involved with what was important to her as she would with what was important to him. In very practical terms, Loris would not only go to the games but would learn about football and enjoy it with Russ. In turn, Russ would come to church and be involved. In her very practical way, Loris expressed it thus: "We would continue to give money to the church of Don James, but we would also give an equal amount to the Church of St. Benedict's. And so they did. The amazing part was the change in Russ. He became committed to the church, the people and the larger community. He actually, in his way became an evangelist. As a detective he saw some horrendous things, murder, suicide, rape and abuse of all kinds. One day he came to me to ask if he could offer my name and phone number to people experiencing trauma. He didn't do this as a "throwaway line". He did it after gently telling people that his faith was important to him and had helped him through difficult times. He did it gently, and without pressure. Imagine being in the such a terrible situation and having the detective offer you the possibility of spiritual comfort. Russ had learned to love his neighbor in a whole new way.

Jesus tells us to love God and love neighbor and for me Janet and Russ are images of that kind of love.