You Shall Love Your Neighbors As Yourself: I Am the LORD
Rev. Emily Wilmarth
First Presbyterian Church of Highlands, NC, October 26, 2014
Matthew 22:34-46
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

"Which commandment is greatest?" It's actually not a bad question. Conventional wisdom in Jesus' time claimed that the scriptures held 613 commandments. Jesus had 613 options to choose from.

And naturally, Jesus responds with just the right answer. Which commandment is most important? I think that sitting here today, we're at a bit of a disadvantage with regard to Jesus' response. So many of us have known Jesus our whole lives. We Christians know how Jesus will answer. We're not going to be wowed or taken aback by his response when we read Matthew's gospel, because we already know which commandment is greatest. We know Jesus will ace this test because the commandments to love God and neighbor and self are the backbone of our faith. It's what we've been working on our whole lives.

The thing is, the leaders of the synagogue were likely expecting the same answer to the question which commandment is greatest. Jesus responds with the words of Israel's historic faith by quoting the law in Deuteronomy: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." This scripture passage makes up part of the shema, a declaration of faith recited daily in the Jewish faith. Jesus makes an obvious choice in proclaiming that love of God is the greatest commandment.

For the second part of his answer Jesus quotes the book of Leviticus. "The second commandment is like the first. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Most of us sitting in the pews today don't have a lot of experience with Leviticus. If you've ever read Leviticus you know it can get dull. There's not much narrative storytelling. But, if your idea of a good read is a law manual, you might find it entertaining. One seminary professor claims that a student told her, "I didn't know it was possible to fall asleep while running on a treadmill until you assigned that Leviticus homework."

Leviticus is largely made up of instructions given by God to the Israelites during their time in the wilderness. Within the instructions God gives to the people, we read countless (and I mean countless) details about how God's people should order their lives. It's actually amazing we Presbyterians, so famous for doing things "decently and in order" don't appreciate Leviticus more than we do.

"You shall love your neighbors as yourself" comes out of the second half of the book of Leviticus. Known as the Holiness Code, the commandments in this part focus on how the Israelites should live in community with one another and with God. While the first half of Leviticus deals with how the Israelites were to properly worship God through ritual and sacrifice, the Holiness Code contains an ethical code of conduct for life in the community. These commandments teach us how to treat one another. When we follow these rules, the community thrives.

When Jesus quotes Leviticus and places loving our neighbors as ourselves right up next to loving God, he gets to the heart of our faith. God created us to live in relationship with God and with each other. God commands us to love God with all of who we are. But it's not just about us just loving God. God commands us to love each other, too. To treat each other as we long to be treated.
The basis for these rules of the Holiness Code comes from verse two of chapter 19. “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” We are created in God’s image, so it follows that we are created to be holy like God. We’re not created to be God, but to bear God’s image. Through our living and loving, we reflect the reality of God’s presence in the world. We imitate God’s holiness through our own actions. When we love each other as we long to be loved, we reflect God’s holiness in the world. These, Jesus claims, are the most important commandments of God.

And so, in this Holiness Code of Leviticus God gives us rules and guidelines for how to love our neighbors. God tells us how to behave so that we can reflect God’s image to others. This code of conduct directs us not to just love in an emotional sense. God expects hands-on actions and behaviors of love toward our neighbors.

At first, it appears that God is talking about the neighbors within the Israelite community, or for us, within our own immediate context – our families, our church, our physical neighborhoods. God commands: Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people. Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. But later in Chapter 19, God also instructs: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Our neighbor is also the person we don’t know intimately. It’s the outsider. Its people we haven’t met, or might never get a chance to meet.

The trouble with the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves is that it’s hard to think about loving our neighbors when we don’t know them personally, or when we don’t see them on a regular basis. When we can relate to another person’s joy or pain, it’s easier to imagine how best to love them like we love ourselves. When someone we know and care about get sick, we’re quick to cook a meal or run an errand. But as the connection to other humans weakens by distance or by any of the other things that divide us, our capacity to show love also weakens. And what about people we won’t ever know who need our loving actions? How do we show love when we can’t even understand their language, when we can’t empathize with their needs, when we’ll never meet them?

Sadly, in so many cases, our ignorance of the challenging realities that strangers face can cause us to fear them rather than love them. Then our fear puts a wall between others and ourselves, and we cannot love them like we should.

I’m also sad to say that, in large part, this kind of fear has guided our nation’s overall reaction to Ebola. When the virus was confined to West Africa, the people infected and dying were merely numbers; not too many of us knew a particular person or family affected. We might have felt compassion, or even sent money or support in the ways we knew how. People and organizations across the globe did respond, and continue to do so. But, our neighbors suffering in West Africa were largely confined to sound bites and stories on the news. I would even argue that their distance, and what seemed like their containment in West Africa, kept effective, large scale, compassionate responses at bay. When our neighbors are a mere number, or a name and face without a personhood attached, we tend to treat them less like neighbors.

When the first two health workers arrived back in Atlanta and were treated at Emory Hospital, our attention became more acute. Folks worried about an outbreak, but fears were allayed by reports that strict isolation practices were in use.
And, then Thomas Eric Duncan arrived off the plane in Dallas. We learned his name and his story, but most of us failed to consider Duncan a neighbor. Many spoke with anger, and still speak with anger, about Duncan, his family, and the health workers that treated him. The same language of fear surrounds the conversation about the latest case reported from New York. Fear has resulted in irrational behavior. In Maine, an elementary school teacher was put on a 21-day leave of absence after traveling to the city of Dallas. A school district staff person explicitly stated: “At this time, we have no information to suggest that this staff member has been in contact with anyone who has been exposed to Ebola.” Meanwhile in New Jersey, two elementary school students recently relocated from Kenya, were kept from going to school because parents of other students feared their children would get the disease. Kenya is as far away from the nearest outbreak in West Africa as Philadelphia is from Seattle. Imagine what it is like for these two young children, awaiting the start of school in a new country, and being stigmatized before their first day.

I’m sad and worried that fear about Ebola makes people respond in unloving ways. Yes, we do need to be cautious. We need safe hospitals equipped with facilities and trained professionals to deal with patients. We all need to know the truth about how we can avoid contracting the virus. What I am suggesting, though, is that we who are commanded to love our neighbors ought to keep a close watch on our fears and insecurities when it comes to our responses to people in dire need of compassion and care.

In the past weeks, the Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, has shown the world what love of neighbor means in the midst of this international crisis. Thomas Eric Duncan’s fiancée is a member of the 3,400 member Dallas church. And once the news broke, the church did not hesitate to stand in support of Duncan, his fiancée, and their family. They have called upon their own members to send letters and cards of support and love. They have participated in an ecumenical prayer vigil for the city of Dallas. I used words from that service in my pastoral prayer last week. Last Sunday, Wilshire Senior Pastor George Mason preached a sermon in which he helped his congregation see how times of fear or uncertainty can cause communities to stop loving their neighbors. He explains that when we feel our security at risk, we begin to “other” our neighbors. He says, “You start ‘othering’ people to put the blame on them in order to make yourself feel innocent and safe. ...there are those who are othering Mr. Duncan for bringing the virus to this country, as if they know that he willfully and knowingly did so, even though he is not here to speak for himself.”

We are seeing the process of ‘othering’ playing out with the more Ebola victims in the United States. Late last week, we learned that the nurses involved in the care for Mr. Duncan at Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas were repeatedly blamed for mishandling the situation. Specifically, hospital authorities implied that nurse Nina Pham failed to correctly chart Duncan's travel from Africa when he first went in to the hospital. It was reported that she failed to undergo correct protocol. Electronic records show that, indeed, Pham did chart his travels. A doctor failed to see it.

Later, the hospital vilified Nurse Amber Vinson for taking a commercial airline flight from Ohio to Dallas after being infected during her care of Duncan. The truth the hospital failed to report was that Vinson was in close contact with the hospital and the CDC, was being carefully monitored, and had been given permission to take the flight. Imagine what her life is like now, as she tries to overcome public blame she doesn’t deserve.

Our ability to “other” people for whatever reason – because they have an illness that frightens us, because their skin color or cultural background or class, age, or politics differs from ours – does not make them any less our neighbors. When we put up walls – physical or emotional - to protect ourselves from others, God calls us to break down those walls. We can’t love our neighbors when we
choose not to see them or reach them. How would we hope our church would respond if one of us contracted Ebola? Pastor Mason told his congregation, “We are going to do everything we can to say that we belong to each other and that we should walk this road together. We will not allow [Duncan’s family, and workers at Presbyterian Hospital and the CDC] to be othered by these circumstances if there is anything we can do about it.”

I think Ebola is a scary disease. I am worried about how many lives we’ve already lost, and how many we will continue to lose as we sort out the best way to respond to the crisis. I’m amazed by people who give their energy and expertise, and most of all, their presence, to help heal the brutal suffering.

When we’re confronted with circumstances or people that frighten us enough to build dividing walls, I think we have to examine what causes our fear. We must hold our response to fear in light of God’s commandments. We must always bear in mind that we are all created in God’s image, to reflect God’s image in the world. We must remember that God has promised to be with us, to never leave us alone. We must always love.

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