

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Year A, Lectionary 30

October 23, 2011

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

Matthew 22:34-46

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The lawyer, in his attempt to entrap Jesus, asks, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” There are over 600 commandments in the Old Testament. How could Jesus ever choose one over the others? He responds, “‘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.” Jesus goes on: “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Can we love when we do not trust? Can we love when we are angry? Can we love when we are afraid?

Can we love a God when we understand God to be cruel? That is the question posed by Joseph Legueri in a recent column in the *Duluth News Tribune*. He writes:

. . . there are some things I sincerely don’t understand about Christians: Are the cruel things the Lord did in the Old Testament fine with them? How can they worship One who is capable of such cruelty? . . . Can someone explain this to me?¹

The author is reflecting on the story of Job in the Old Testament. Job worships God. Satan observes this and suggests that, were Job to be subjected to suffering, he might no longer worship God. God gives permission for Satan to destroy all that Job has, including his children and their families, along with Job’s wealth. Job still worships God. When Satan appeals to God a second time, God gives permission to afflict Job with painful boils from his head to his feet, but only to spare his life. Still Job worships God.

Thus Legueri’s question: how can Christians worship One who is capable of such cruelty? It’s a good question.

Our confirmation students are studying the Old Testament this year. The overall theme for the year is, “What Does the Old Testament Say About God?” The Old Testament says many things about God, and, if Joseph Legueri were sitting in class, I can imagine that every Wednesday, sometime during the teaching time, he would raise his hand and say, “What about Job?”

While Legueri’s question is legitimate, his methodology is flawed. He takes one slice of the Bible, which is collection of writings by many different authors, covering more than a thousand years, and projects that single slice onto God in order to define God’s character.

This is why we *study* the Bible. This is why we say that the various books of scripture are in *conversation* with themselves, and that some parts of the Bible *critique* other parts, in order to give us a more complete, fleshed out, and accurate picture of who God is and what God's intentions for us are.

Next Sunday, on Reformation Sunday, three young people will profess their faith on their Confirmation Sunday. If I were to examine them on the spot and ask them each the question, "What Does the Old Testament Say About God?," each of them would say (or I *hope* they would say), "the Old Testament says that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." And they would say that, not because I, their pastor told them to say that, but because that is indeed what the Old Testament says about God.

And, if God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, then *God is worthy of our love and worship.*

And, just in case we might miss that God as presented in the Old Testament is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love—just in case we might miss that—God sent Jesus into the world to reveal God's true nature to us. Jesus is God in *particular*, not in the abstract.

Our oldest child, Erik, is in Guatemala on a mission trip. Last night my wife, Lynn, and I looked at photos that were posted on Facebook, photos of their project and of the people. One photo in particular struck me. It is a life-like statue of Jesus carrying his cross, with blood streaking down his forehead and face, blood from the crown of thorns that is pressed into his head. I was struck by the reality of the likeness, but, most of all, I was struck by the pain and the love that show through his eyes.

Just in case we might miss that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, God sent Jesus into the world to reveal God's true nature. Jesus is God in *particular*, not in the abstract.

This is what I would say to Joseph Legueri if he were to ask his question during confirmation class, or any other time. We know God through the pain and love of Jesus. Anything and everything that is said about God in all of scripture is funneled into and filtered through the lens of the pain and love of Jesus. God cannot be known by us outside of that.

The issue of *particularity* also holds with respect to love of neighbor. While we might be willing and able, on our own, to love our neighbor if we are free to pick and choose our neighbors, so as to choose agreeable ones, those we like, and even love, on our own power. It's easy to love our neighbors in the abstract. It's a rather nice and honorable notion. It's been said that Christians even love their enemies . . . until they have one.

The problem with the commandment to love our neighbors is their *particularity*. Jesus means, in particular, *all* our neighbors. We don't have the option to pick and choose. We're to love *all* of them.

To love our neighbors does not necessarily mean that we feel warm fuzzies about them. Love as Jesus talks about is not so much an emotion as it is an attitude and an action toward. It is seeing in our neighbor the image of God. It is seeing our neighbor, as best we can, as God sees them.

Last night, Lynn and I were looking at the photos posted on Facebook of the mission trip to Guatemala, with all the beautiful children, and the faces of the hardworking men and women, living in poverty, faces lined with worry and hardship. We also looked at a series of photos of our 2 ½ year old grandson, Simon, son of our boy Erik, who lives in Baltimore. Our son Erik left his little boy behind in Baltimore to go to Guatemala to build a medical clinic for people he has never seen before and probably never will see again. And as I looked at all those photos, photos of the people in Guatemala and photos of our grandson, I was struck by this: Jesus does not have to tell me to love my grandson, but Jesus does have to tell me to love my neighbor, even those I will never know and never see in far-off Guatemala.

At the end of our weekly Sandwich & Scripture Bible study, I often give an assignment for the upcoming week. Today, Jesus is giving each of us an assignment. Jesus will put countless neighbors in our life during the upcoming week, many whom we know, but some, perhaps many, whom we do not know. The assignment from Jesus is to *love* them—all of them. Our assignment is to see our neighbor through those eyes of the statue of Jesus carrying his cross in Guatemala, through those eyes of pain and love. Our assignment this week is to love our neighbor—all of them. Next Sunday, let's check in to see how the week went for us.

The truth of the matter is this: the command to love God and the command to love neighbor are really one and the same, two sides of the same coin. For the measure of our love for God is our love for neighbor.

And the Good News in all of this is that we love, not on our own accord or own power, but we love because God first loved us. And with God all things are possible.

Thanks be to God!

¹Joseph Legueri, "God: Period of question mark?," *The Duluth News Tribune*, 7 October, 2011, Opinion.