

THE NEW COMMANDMENT OF LOVE

A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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A new commandment? How can we make sense of the two biblical readings we've heard from this Sunday's lectionary: one from the Hebrew Bible,ⁱ or what Christians have called the Old Testament, and one from the New Testament?ⁱⁱ According to the Gospel of John, a so-called "new commandment" is given by Jesus to his disciples at the Last Supper. This is it: "You should love one another."ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, in the third book of the Torah, Leviticus, which dates back in written form to the sixth century before Christ,^{iv} it's stated "You should love your neighbor as yourself."^v Jesus himself had previously cited Leviticus, along with a verse from Deuteronomy, when asked by Pharisees which commandment in the biblical law is the greatest. He responded, "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."^{vi}

Not only that, but much of Jesus' ministry of love seems derived from specific injunctions in Leviticus -- those which Mary Greene read earlier -- which lead up to the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. For example, the poor and the alien are to be provided for, the deaf and blind are to be protected, judgments are to be just, without deferring to the great, slander is proscribed along with theft and fraud, and no one is to hate another in his or her heart, take vengeance, or even bear a grudge.^{vii}

Perhaps what is new about Jesus' commandment to his disciples to love one another is the context within which it's given. He's to be betrayed by one of his disciples that very night. Most of the rest of them are going to run away, as soldiers take Jesus to be tried, flogged and crucified. And the apostle Peter -- upon whom Jesus says he will build his church^{viii} -- will deny him three times. It seems like a sorry and sordid group of so-called friends whom Jesus is calling upon to love him and to love each other. Yet, the important point, I think, is that Jesus is calling upon them for a new kind of love beyond that requested in Leviticus. He's calling for a kind of love for which one is willing to die, and at first his disciples don't seem to be up to it. Most of us can probably identify with their sentiments!

Later in the gospel of John, Jesus puts the point more explicitly: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."^{ix} Jesus has so loved his friends, and so radically acted out his love in the world, that he's about to be crucified as a threat to the Roman empire, not to mention to the religious establishment of his day. This is the man who, just days before his Last Supper, rode into Jerusalem to the enchantment of crowds waving palms and shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord -- the King of Israel."^x Jesus overturned the money

changers' tables in the temple, saying that they had made the most sacred place in Israel a den of robbers.^{xi} He cured the blind and the lame.^{xii} He preached against the scribes and pharisees, calling them hypocrites, claiming they lock people out of the kingdom of heaven, and on earth neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and good faith.^{xiii} He said that the mighty will brought low, while the lowly hungry should be fed, the thirsty be given drink, the stranger be welcomed, the naked be clothed, the sick be cared for, and the prisoners be visited. Brave and powerful words and actions then. Brave and powerful in today's war-torn world as well, and when we think, for example, of how the mighty have treated those incarcerated in the prisons of Iraq, before and after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Jesus saw all that he said and did as a expression of true love. That's what he expected of his disciples, even though it put them at risk of their lives. And that's what he expects of us as well.

Perhaps one of the best modern exemplars of this new commandment of love was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He lived and died trying to manifest the radical form of love to which Jesus has called us. Remember how he put it in the sermon he delivered the very night before he was assassinated: "Now we're going to march again... For when people get caught up with that which is right, and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory... We need all of you... Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness... The question is not, 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?' [The question is] 'If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them? ... [When] I got into Memphis...some began to...talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our white brothers? ... Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will... I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."^{xiv}

King said more than once that we're not fully alive until we've found something for which we're willing to die. In his book The Strength to Love he directly confronted the fear of death, quoting the First Letter of John: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear." He explains that "The kind of love which led Christ to a cross and kept Paul unembittered amid the angry torrents of persecution is not soft, anemic, and sentimental. Such love confronts evil without flinching..." Looking at the arms race of his day, though, designed to ease fear through strength, he wrote that "Not arms, but [only] love, understanding and organized goodwill can cast out fear."^{xv}

Now, the reality is that most of us are not Martin Luther Kings. How can we, realistically, in our own daily lives, understand and practice the new commandment of love of which Jesus was speaking? Well, today is Mother's Day. There's mother love. Most mothers I know say that they love their children so deeply and fully that unquestioningly in an instant they would give up their own lives to save one of their children's lives. Many fathers might say that too, and I have, but this is Mother's Day. So, there's a multitude of mothers whose love is so strong that they are willing to die for another. They meet King's test of being fully alive.

Then, I was conducting a wedding yesterday, in which the bride and groom asked that the passage from John's gospel be read which includes these verses: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's

life for one's friends."^{xvi} I found myself saying to the couple that "Your joy as husband and wife will be complete only when you can call each other true friends, and when you are ready to lay down your lives for each other." I really believe that's true, as this couple does. Being fully alive, fully committed, and fully fulfilled in a marriage entails the willingness to give up one's life instantaneously and unquestioningly to save your spouse's life. Or am I being too romantic and dramatic here? If not, we now have children and spouses as a set of people for which many of us ordinary non-Martin Luther Kings would be willing to give up our lives. So, it seems as if we're over the threshold for Jesus' new commandment of love.

What about friends who are not family members? As I explained in a sermon a year ago, when I was a young child I remember being told the story of Damon and Pythias, two friends in the Sicilian city-state of Syracuse in the fourth century B.C. Pythias spoke out against the king, who ordered him executed for treason. Pythias asked permission to go home long enough to say goodbye to his wife and children and put his household in order. His friend Damon instantly volunteered to be imprisoned until Pythias returned, and to be killed himself if Pythias didn't show up on the execution date. As the fatal day approached without Pythias having returned, the king came to the prison to sneer at Damon and to see if he was sorry for having made such an arrangement. "You were a fool to rely on your friend's promise," scoffed the king. "Did you really think he would sacrifice his life for you or anyone else?" Damon simply replied, "He is my friend. I trust him." As Damon was being led out to be executed on the crucial day, Pythias suddenly appeared, breathlessly exclaiming, "You are safe, praise the gods. My ship was wrecked in a storm, and then bandits attacked me on the road. But I refused to give up hope, and at last I've made it back in time. I am ready to receive my sentence of death." The king was so astonished and moved that he revoked the death sentence out of respect for their friendship.^{xvii}

So, if any of us have these kinds of friendships, our set of people to fulfill Jesus' new commandment of love may now include children, spouses and close friends. Our challenge, then, is to keep expanding the circle to take in more and more other kinds of people. Jesus' commandment becomes aspirational and inspirational. Will we be ready to follow a new Martin Luther King, who calls us to love even our enemies unto death? Will we be ready to put our lives nonviolently on the line, without fear, to promote peace and justice for all?

Professor Huston Smith has written a best-selling book on The World's Religions which has chapters on Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, among other traditions. As he examines Christianity comparatively with other religions, he finds that its unique contribution, the essence of its "good news" has been a new and different kind of love as preached and practiced by Jesus, and ultimately by many of his followers. As Smith writes, "Conventional love is evoked by lovable qualities in the beloved, but the love people encountered from Christ embraced sinners and outcasts, Samaritans and enemies. It gave, not prudentially in order to receive, but because giving was its nature." Smith points out that this kind of love dramatically reduced Christians' fears, including the fear of death. It also released Christians from the crippling confines of ego. They were freed to find the joy of their full selves after letting go their small, everyday selves.^{xviii}

So I hope many of you are able to leave this church today and celebrate Mother's Day,

recognizing how wide and deep mother love can be. I hope many of you are able, or have been able, to have some life experience with a partner to whom you are committed unto death. I hope each of your lives has or will include at least one friendship at the Damon and Pythias level. And then, I hope those of you who call yourselves Christians are able to follow in Jesus' footsteps, building an expanding circle of self-sacrificing love which includes the hungry and the thirsty, the alien, the homeless, the sick, and the imprisoned. For it is only by a willingness ultimately to lose our lives in service to others that we will ever truly find our lives.^{xix}

NOTES

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- i. Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18.
 - ii. John 13: 31-35.
 - iii. John 13:34.
 - iv. The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 67.
 - v. Leviticus 19:18.
 - vi. Matthew 22: 34-40; see also Mark 12: 28-34 and Luke 10: 25-28.
 - vii. Leviticus 19: 10-11, 13-18.
 - viii. See Matthew 16:18.
 - ix. John 15: 12-13.
 - x. John 12:13.
 - xi. Matthew 21: 12-13.
 - xii. Matthew 21:14.
 - xiii. Matthew 23: 13, 23.
 - xiv. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," a sermon delivered on April 3, 1968, at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee and reproduced in James Melvin Washington, A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 281-282, 284-286.
 - xv. Martin Luther King, Jr., The Strength to Love (1963), as excerpted in Washington, Testament of Hope, pp. 509, 513.
 - xvi. John 15: 12-13.
 - xvii. "Damon and Pythias," as told in William J. Bennett (ed.), The Book of Virtues (New York:

Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 306-311.

xviii. Huston Smith, The World's Religions (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 330-335.

xix. See Matthew 10:39 and 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24 and 17:23; John 12:25.