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Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

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How are we to find our way in the maze of commandments and restrictions laid down in the Bible and all around us? That is what a scribe or rabbinic lawyer from the party of the Pharisees asks of Jesus in today's gospel. In this passage Jesus draws out of Jewish Law two great commandments—to love God wholeheartedly and to love your neighbor as yourself. This passage is a good one for people who are unsure of all the confusing and conflicting messages that can be found in Scripture, as well as those coming from parents or peers, preachers or politicians of various stripes about God and God's purposes for us.

First, let us not forget that the original context of our gospel story is the Jewish Jesus speaking to a Jewish lawyer and a Jewish audience. Unfortunately, many interpreters of this gospel—especially where this interaction appears as a “test” here in Matthew's gospel; or in Luke's gospel, in which Jesus follows the retort by the Jewish lawyer who asks, “Who is my neighbor?” with the parable of the Good Samaritan—many interpreters take Jesus out of his Jewish context and use these texts to imply that first century Judaism (and Judaism in general) was caught up in legalism, obsessed with purity, and couldn't see the forest for the trees. Such interpretations leave an impression that somehow Judaism is backward and antiquated, and therefore Christianity is progressive and superior. A book by the Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Amy-Jill Levine called The Misunderstood Jew helps clear the air on such stereotypes, especially the one that holds that Judaism, or Jews in Jesus' day, were more concerned with ceremonialism and ritual purity than with love or compassion.ⁱ

Unpacking this gospel text reminds us that we can no longer stereotype Judaism, or any other religious tradition, for that matter. Jesus challenges the lawyer and the rest of his people not on their Jewishness, but on their, and our, human tendency toward parochialism, or presumptions of privilege.ⁱⁱ Those can have an insidious way of insulating us from others, and adding to the fact that we're often easily distracted,ⁱⁱⁱ or just plain tired, or don't want to be bothered to go beyond our comfort zone to extend love to our neighbors, especially if we don't know them. Our hearts easily become resistant and we act with avoidance, prejudice and assign blame, or we simply become apathetic, and act or refuse to act, based on that indifference, fatigue and “passing the buck”—surely someone *e/se* will help that person or address that need or issue. If we're comfortable ourselves we tend not to be so alert to the suffering of others. And we'd rather remain comfortable. But what we learn from the Jewish prophets and Jesus is to put ourselves in places where our comfort can be disrupted, and then to learn from those disruptions.

Jesus replies to this lawyer's question with a two-fold originality and simplicity. From the confession of faith which every devout Jew recites twice a day, Jesus retains first of all the commandment to love God as was stated by Moses in Deuteronomy^{iv} thereby making it stand out in full relief. If God is unique, beyond compare, so that nothing has value

except in relationship to God, then the commandment to love God above everything else, is indeed the first, as Moses stated: “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

But Jesus also draws the lawyer’s attention to another commandment found tucked in the Book of Leviticus (19:18). Although it comes second, love of neighbor is for Jesus inseparable from the love of God. For it is by a relationship of love extended toward others that we human beings can resemble God, and glorify God’s being and purpose of Love, and get to know God who is otherwise unknowable except through love. That is the whole aim of the Law of Moses, and the message of the prophets and of all of Scripture. As Matthew’s gospel put it: “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”^v Surely, if there is an unequivocal sign which characterizes the one who is not far from the Kingdom, then it is the capacity to love. Not just to be a good practicing Jew or Christian, keeping the observances and rules, but someone who loves and who is at the service of love both to God and, inseparably, to our neighbor and ourselves.^{vi}

Now some Christians like to believe that Jesus invented love, but these two great commandments come straight out of the Torah, which Jesus and other Jews would have recited from the time of their youth. Combining them in this way, though, Jesus marries love of God to love of neighbor. While plenty of us would rather be left alone to love God in private, that is not an option. The invisible God dwells at the center of a wheel or web of visible neighbors—not just the neighbors we feel most familiar with or comfortable around, either—along with all those neighbors we see no longer, comprising “the communion of saints” or “cloud of witnesses.” Drawing closer to God, we draw closer to one another. This is one of life’s immutable laws—there is no other way to the center. In these two inextricably linked commandments we hear that love should be the driving force of life, implying also that love includes, struggles for and brings, justice and mutual respect through the power that connects people to one another (rather than through the power that one person or group uses to dominate another). Therefore, love of God and neighbor and one’s self is lived out in many ways in our personal lives, *but also* in our many public relationships as we seek to be disciples, neighbors and citizens in our church and neighborhoods and nation and world. And so, Jesus’ summary of the whole of the spiritual and moral life, reiterating these two commandments, should provide food for thought for the many institutions in our society in which concern for law and order; rules and regulations; policies and procedures; tenets and traditions; systems of servicing others and/or enriching oneself, can often leave so little place for the gratuitousness of love or of simple caring and mercy, and justice.

What disturbs me the most these days, along with continued stereotyping (and expressions of superiority and exceptionalism), is a wider public culture of selfishness and a deeply cynical and mean-spirited attitude. We don’t have time right now to delve into the pros and cons of Ayn Rand’s still popular philosophy, or the social and ethical shortcomings of libertarianism. Just nine days before the election for many seats in Congress and in state government, suffice it to say that the separation of Church and State does not separate faith and faith communities from the public arena. As I have said before, faith is personal, but it is not private; and neither Judaism nor Christianity – or any

other faith tradition - can be fully, spiritually renewing or redemptive without being socially responsible. Our biblical faith states that God is One and God is sovereign - Sovereign of all creation, Sovereign of our personal and family lives, of society and all its institutions. The role of communities of faith is this: to call attention to the ethical dimensions of all issues; to keep alive theologically informed values as a norm for social, economic and political life; and to point out the demands of our faith for a just transformation of society. Our religious institutions are part of the Voluntary Sector (James Madison) aka Civil Society (David Hume) [aka the Third Sector (Peter Drucker)]. The importance of reach out to one another and of finding common ground within this sector, and expressing itself responsibly—speaking truth to power—is so that we may engage the public/governmental and private/market sectors maturely and effectively – these other two powerful sectors.^{vii}

I hope we will all the more take our place alongside others from all walks of life to make a *changed situation* in the quality of life for those who are being pushed further and further to the margins in this city and across this land.^{viii} May we exercise our discipleship and citizenship in all parts of our personal and public life.^{ix} This is where the rubber hits the road—where our theology becomes action, where we can deepen what it means to be a good neighbor, to act effectively on our faith and values, loving God, and our neighbors as ourselves, and thus join Christ’s mission of repairing this world.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), pp. 144-149. Some go as far as to say that their law was more important than loving their neighbor—never mind that the law says to *love your neighbor!*—and never mind that the scribe in this text from Mark makes a special point of saying that these two great commandments to love God and our neighbor as ourselves are “much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

ⁱⁱ Let us also remember that when we find ourselves in a more privileged and powerful position, at times we can have trouble recognizing in the downtrodden stranger the sister or brother who needs our help. We tend to see the power differential first, the kinship with that or those fellow human beings only second. Beyond that, we have an even harder time seeing in the other the image of God, the face of Christ, especially when the other presents such a distressing disguise in their beaten or broken state. Instead we see first how different other persons and their situations are from us; and sometimes that delays or prevents us from seeing the fundamental connections we have with our sisters or brothers who do not look like or act like us or do not have what we have.

Privilege is not in itself a bad thing. There is nothing wrong, for example, with getting to a point of privilege of living in a community where fear and crime or hunger and distress do not permeate through the neighborhood day and night. The problem lies, though, in the assumption of an *extra* privilege—an *unjust* privilege—of assuming that we then do not have to connect with people whose lives *are* caught up in situations where fear and crime or hunger and distress do permeate their days and nights. No, we are not our brother’s keeper, but we are our brother’s brother or sister.

ⁱⁱⁱ Writers such as Parker Palmer, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Ram Dass, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Saul Alinsky all point out that much of human action could be classified as distraction; and distractions more often than not cause misplaced action, hyper-action, inaction, re-enactment, or reaction. Already we are all often so occupied with jobs, family life and other pursuits; and we are often so pre-occupied with worries about future activities. Occupations fill our time and space now and pre-occupations fill our time and space long before we even get there.

In simple interactions - for example, if we get on an elevator and we unexpectedly encounter a stranger who says he is out of work and his family is hungry. How do we respond? Well, often in a distracted way. We may think—we’ve already put money in the collection plate; we gave at the office; we paid our taxes—

those funds should be working for this guy. Or we think—come on, we’ve been asked by lots of worthy causes lately and have responded, and oh yeah, that other guy I gave to yesterday on the street or at the church—I’ve got to draw a line somewhere.

Or we’ve been taught “family first” and this guy is definitely “not one of us.” Or we’ve grown up with canned food drives without having to be brought face to face with those who are hungry. Or we are used to our privacy in public places and thus look at our shoes when we get into the elevator, rather than anyone in the elevator, and of course we’re often tired and just don’t want to be bothered. And who is this guy anyway? A newly released mental patient? We might give him some money. An addict? Well, we might only make things worse. Does he really need my help or is he giving me a story? He’s invading our privacy. Is he dangerous? And we walk on. So much distracts us from facing such an interruption and engaging in informal, immediate and direct action that could be helpful. We are often distracted from right action by our fears of failure or success, criticism or praise, as well as fears of the unfamiliar and all that which could threaten our “comfort zone” or disturb our places of privilege. I find it very hard to come to a place of “right action” oftentimes.

Then there are yet further internal distractions. For example, we may have a difficult time facing the suffering of others, especially strangers, because we don’t know how to deal with our own pain and vulnerability. Also, our personal motives and needs can distract us from being present and helpful. In these more internal distractions, we find the old habit of self-protectiveness buried within, that holds us back. This self-protective tendency that says “better safe than sorry,” builds on the inertia of not wanting to leave familiar circles of association. This clinging distracts us further and holds us back from even the simplest helpful actions such as with the guy on the elevator. These internal distractions only add to feelings of inadequacy in dealing with the wider and cruel world. And we act less and give little when we feel small.

Besides clinging to familiar circles of association, we also find ourselves fitting into one or a few comfortable roles or identities while denying others which we are capable of, thus again limiting our helpful action. For example, you may have heard someone say, “I’m the surgeon. You really ought to discuss your feelings about this condition with someone else,” or someone saying, “I’m really a private person—I don’t have much to do with community issues.” But the effect of defining ourselves in comfortable roles is what that does to others, not just ourselves.

By dispassionately acknowledging our personal needs, we lessen their grip on our actions and we make room for an essential change of perspective. As our actions become less hostage to our needs, we can call upon a deeper, more universal source of action, one that is steady, less distracted and more responsive.

^{iv} Deuteronomy 6:4-5

^v Deuteronomy had already commanded love of God, and Leviticus love of one’s neighbor as oneself. The new dimension that Jesus added was that the two are one, inseparable, becoming together the greatest commandment. Not only does Jesus make these two commandments one, he also says that no commandment is greater than these, or as he says in Matthew’s gospel: “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” These commandments are the hinges, as it were, of the door to an integrated life, to a life of congruency in which thought, word and deed are all connected as one. Break off either of these hinges and the whole spiritual and moral edifice collapses. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

^{vi} As Frederick Buechner put it, in the Jewish and “Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will. When [Leviticus or] Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, [we are not being told] to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling...On the contrary, [we are being told] to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end, even if it means sometimes just leaving them alone.” – see Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 54.

^{vii} Having said this, we need to remind ourselves that as we attempt to apply spiritual values to our public life, our faith tradition is not about imposing sectarian doctrines on others’ lives. Nor is it about becoming a

religious interest group or single-issue voting bloc. In fact, religious communities as communities of conscience within our pluralistic public arena are called to offer an alternative to ideological religion (whether from right, left or center). We are called to be value-driven but not ideological, political but not narrowly partisan, civil but not soft - and involved but not used.

^{viii} Affordable housing and quality education, accessible and affordable health care and a living wage are all basic human rights, and poverty persists whenever they are denied.

^{ix} At the local level, working all the more with others, may we expect to address specific issues of our common and community life. Banding together with other congregations and community-based institutions is hard but very rewarding work.