

The Great Commandment of Peace

There is a famous story in the Talmud about Rabbi Hillel. Rabbi Hillel was approached by a Gentile potential convert to Judaism. The Gentile told Hillel that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could explain the Torah while standing on one foot. Trying to explain something while standing on one foot forces you to keep it short. Some might think it would be a good idea to make everyone say their piece at a meeting while standing on one foot, or me to give the sermon while standing on one foot. Well, Hillel complied. He stood on one foot and said “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah. The rest is the explanation of this. Go and study it.” That is the Jewish formulation of the Golden Rule, found in every major religion. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus’ formulation was more positive: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

In this passage (Mark 12:28-34) Jesus is asked a similar question to the one that Rabbi Hillel was asked and gives a similar answer. As Laur said last week, after Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He is put through a gauntlet of questions by the religious leaders, all trying to trap Him in some way and Jesus successfully evades them all.

Then someone finally asks Jesus a question in good faith. You can picture the scribe listening to Jesus’ answers to difficult political and theological questions and he has one question that’s been nagging at him for a long time. There are 613 laws in the Torah. Some of them go together like PB and J and others seem to create some difficult dilemmas. When there is a conflict between following one law and another, how do you know what to do? Now here’s this guy who seems to be able to stand toe to toe with religious scholars on deep theological issues. I wonder what his take on this is. Hey Jesus, what is the most important commandment in the Torah. Jesus doesn’t hesitate. “Love the Lord you God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Then he gives a second: Love your neighbour as yourself. The scribe agrees that those two are the greatest commandments and Jesus sees that he is sincere and commends him. Then everyone stops trying to argue with Jesus.

Love God and love your neighbour. That really sums it up doesn’t it? If you look at the ten commandments, they’re all about those two aren’t they? The first four are all about loving God. Don’t worship anyone but God. Don’t make idols depicting any god (including the true God). Don’t use God’s name in vain. Rest on the Sabbath (to worship God). The latter six are all about loving your neighbour. Obey your parents. Don’t kill. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal. Don’t lie. Don’t covet what belongs to someone else. The rest of the Torah is all about what loving God and loving your neighbour looked like in the world of the ancient Israelites.

In elevating these commandments, Jesus gives us both freedom and responsibility. He gives us the freedom to not have to memorize a whole bunch of rules and worry about stumbling over them. We don’t need to worry that if we step one toe out of line we’ll be kicked out of church or be sent to Hell. We just need to worry about loving God and loving each other. On the other hand, that freedom comes with huge responsibility. We now need to apply those rules in our contemporary situations. God has freed us from legalism but hasn’t let us off the hook of moral responsibility. In fact, now we are responsible for figuring it out using our own minds and hearts while relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to determine what the right thing to do is in difficult situations.

Today is Peace Sunday. I have always believed that Peace Sunday is not in opposition to Remembrance Day, but rather a compliment to it. As the buttons say, “To remember is to work for

peace.” We remember the horrors of World War I and II and what led up to them and we use those memories to remind us to strive for peace. I can’t help but think about what following the commandments meant for German Christians in Nazi Germany. Many decided that it meant hiding Jews from the Gestapo to protect them from being killed. Then the soldiers knocked on their doors to inquire of them. Those protecting the Jews would have to lie to the soldiers if their protection was to be any good. Of course, that violates the ninth commandment! However, those German Christians knew there was a higher law than the ninth commandment. The law of love! The law to love your neighbour as yourself. They were called to discern what loving your neighbour as yourself meant during that time. Over here, when war was declared, Christians had to decide what love of God and love of neighbour meant they should do. Some determined that it meant going over to fight and some determined that it meant resisting the further perpetuation of violence. It was a complex decision and that’s why good, sincere Christians came up with different answers to the question. God doesn’t ask for uniformity. The apostles certainly didn’t agree on everything, but they all used love as their watchword.

Today we are also asked to discern what loving your neighbour means in our situation. We’re not called to do anything so dramatic as to fight or resist a war. But I think we are called to do a couple of simple things. We are called to wear masks when we go out, to practice physical distancing and if we can, to get our shots to protect others from getting sick. Those are simple things we’ve had to do for the past year and a half. There are other things as well that may be more difficult. As the pandemic has continued, I’ve been spending more time on Facebook. Over the course of this time, I’ve seen people put up very politically charged posts that made me very uncomfortable. Sometimes, I’ve felt the urge to jump down their throats and tell them how wrong they are. But in the interests of peace, I’ve had to resist. I’m not always successful, I’ll admit. However, I do think we are called to back away from verbal warfare. You see, most of these people I resist engaging with, I consider my friends. I don’t feel that we should stop being friends because we disagree. I also don’t feel that we should stop loving those we disagree with. Sometimes loving your neighbour means not hitting “send” on that post!

What it always means, and this is extremely difficult for a lot of us, is to make the effort to understand where the other person is coming from. We need to understand what people are going through. As we begin to see the other side of this pandemic and things begin to get back to normal, we will want to see our friends again, including our facebook friends. We don’t want to alienate each other during this time and we need to remember that peace starts with our interpersonal relationships.

I saw a post a while ago that really resonated with me. It said “you know who’s going through a lot right now? Everyone! Just be kind.” That’s what Jesus was saying when he singled out these two commandments. That’s what God’s people throughout history have been trying to do. That’s what I’m saying in this sermon. [stand on one foot] “Just be kind.” Amen.