

"Loving Our Neighbors"

**"I WILL,
WITH GOD'S
HELP."**

"Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

I will with God's help."

This is now the fourth sermon in a five part Lenten series which I am preaching on our Baptismal Covenant (a covenant that we all renew each Easter and at every baptism and on various other occasions). And *that* was the fourth promise we make at our baptism; that we will, with God's help, seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self.

This fourth promise of our Baptismal Covenant is perhaps the most familiar. We have probably all been reciting those words since our childhood - "love thy neighbor as thyself." They form, of course, the second part of Jesus' famous Summary of the Law: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy

neighbor as thyself. Upon these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

For many Christians the phrase "love thy neighbor as thyself" is just a reworking of the so-called 'Golden Rule,' 'to do unto others as you would have others do unto you.' And for many Christians this promise of 'loving your neighbor as yourself' is seen as the primary vow we make at our Baptism, even though it is the second in Jesus' summary. Indeed many Christians live out their faith as though this was the **only** promise we make at our Baptism, to love our neighbor as our self. But as we have seen it is not the only promise we make!

For these so-called "Golden Rule" Christians, the **most** important attribute of a Christian is simply being kind and considerate of others; being nice to one another. "Why can't we all just get along" seems to be the mantra of Golden Rule Christians. Thus Golden Rule Christians are very concerned with ethical practices, which cohere into something we might call a 'good life,' considered by many to be the highest compliment one can pay a Christian. "He led a good life," meaning that he was a kind person, who didn't offend others.

The most important task then of the Church for Golden Rule Christians is often seen as service to people in need. And indeed these Golden Rule Christians often regularly engage in good works and social outreach. Such Golden Rule Christians also seem deeply

concerned to provide religious and moral training for their children, so as to continue the Golden Rule tradition. But such Christians are usually less interested with say, Bible study, for they don't want to uncomfortably argue religious interpretations or doctrines, allowing instead every one to believe as they wish to believe. These Golden Rule Christians also don't usually delve into the messiness of struggling with life's great questions or in developing a coherent theological understanding, for the goal of Golden Rule Christians is rarely to change another person's beliefs nor to challenge the political system in which we live. Instead they exhort that everyone should be guided by their own conscience.

Thus the Golden Rule Christians often exhibit an appalling modesty about their faith, and usually vehemently reject any invitational religious outreach of any kind, finding such evangelical efforts shamefully disrespectful of the views of others. Therefore Golden Rule congregations easily welcome in newcomers, but they rarely really go out and seek them, because such actions provoke slight twinges of discomfort, embarrassment, or distaste. Since Golden Rule Christians are less likely than others to attend challenging religious programs designed for adult education or spiritual formation, especially in intimate small groups, many of these adults cling to familiar worship patterns as their one reliable touchstone with transcendence. Which is why

worship is so important to some. Thus such Christians when asked about their experience of God often must pause to search for words and articulation, and may come up with little more than vague fuzzy warm feelings and pious sentiments. Why can't we just love our neighbor as ourselves? Why can't we just be "nice" to one another, isn't that what Christianity is all about anyway? Indeed, when people do something that isn't quite nice, don't we often say something like "that wasn't very Christian of them"?

Well, I for one am NOT a Golden Rule Christian, nor do I believe that is what we are called by God to be, nor is it what we promise to be in our baptismal vows. This almost 'allergic' passive reaction to evangelism and social justice concerns among Golden Rule Christians stands in marked contrast, I believe, to the other more active promises and vows that we make at our baptism; when we promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers; when we promise to persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord; when we promise that we will proclaim by our words and examples the Good News of God in Christ; and when we promise to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

The kind of love demanded of us in our fourth Baptismal promise is NOT some kind of warm, fuzzy pious feeling of kindness towards others. That was not the kind of love Jesus exemplified in

his life or in his actions. Jesus challenged others. He confronted authorities. Disputed with religious leaders. And yet was also able to reach out and love individuals who were rejected or ignored by so many in his society, like the sinners and tax collectors, the woman at the well, the slave of the Centurion, the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, and the woman caught in adultery, for example. No, Jesus was more than a Golden Rule Christian, and so should we be.

Indeed when I think of Jesus' mandate for us to love one another as he loved us, I cannot help but remember the writer Scott Peck's definition of love in his extraordinarily successful book, *The Road Less Traveled*, where Peck boldly declared that 'love is an action, not a feeling.' "Many, many people possessing a feeling of love and even acting in response to that feeling, act in all manner of unloving and destructive ways," he writes. Our world is littered with the wounded and maimed children of so-called loving parents, for example. Or think of the serious spousal abuse of so-called loving partners. There are people who neglect or demean or destroy others by the cruelest means imaginable, who more often than not will consider themselves to be loving individuals, and will justify their appalling actions in some other way, confident that they really do feel love for those they abuse.

"On the other hand," Peck writes, "a genuinely loving individual will often take loving and constructive action toward a person he or she consciously dislikes, actually feeling no love toward the person at the time and perhaps even finding the person repugnant in some way." Think of Jesus' interaction with Judas, or with the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter he healed whom he called a dog, or the notorious sinner who washed his feet at the Pharisee's house, or St. Francis kissing a leper.

Love is an action, not a feeling. And the common tendency to confuse Christian love with warm feelings and pious tenderness towards one another allows us all manner of self-deception. It is self-serving to confuse love with feelings. For while it is easy and reassuring for us to find evidence of warm loving feelings within ourselves, it may be quite difficult and even painful for us to search through our actions for evidence of really loving our neighbors as ourselves.

On the day after Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another as he loved us, Jesus gave his life for us. He gave his back to the smiters. He was spit upon and whipped. He was stripped and nailed to a tree. He was despised and rejected by all. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," Jesus says. "You are my friends, if you do what I command you." (Jn. 15.12).

As we draw nearer to Holy Week and to the renewal of our Baptismal Covenant, I encourage us all to meditate prayerfully upon that frail and bloody body hanging from the cross. Let us consider carefully not what we think or believe it all means, or even what emotions are stirred within us. Let us instead carefully review our actions; and really seek to love one another, as Christ loved us, for with God's help, we can. AMEN.