

All You Need is Love

Sermon by John Strommen on Exodus 20:1-17 June 17, 2018

Is that true? All you need is love? Don't you need other things, too? I'm sure you do, but it probably can be said that anything good, if it's good, comes out of love. As my professor at Luther says, the seven virtues in Christian tradition are nothing but footnotes or applications of love. There is only one virtue: love. So I'd have to agree with John, Paul, George and Ringo. Jesus did. When asked which commandment was the most important one in the law, Jesus famously said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." In other words, *love* pretty much sums up everything God wants to say.

Both of these kinds of love - love God and neighbor - are possible because, *and only because* God first loved us. As God reminded the Israelites in his preface before the commandments: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, who delivered you from slavery." And then it goes on to the first commandment and the rest. So the real sense of this is: I am the Lord your God, *therefore...* you shall have no other gods, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, etc.

And again, why did God deliver the Hebrews from slavery? Why did God send his son to be one of us and die in order that we might live? Love. So with the commandments, God is really saying, "Well, I have shown you what really matters: love. So ride that wave of love that I send to you. Ride it and go; do likewise. Love me and those around you." So, how might we love someone like God, who is not exactly our next door neighbor? Love God by thanking God for God's gifts to you, by trusting in God's faithfulness to you, for it is true, you've been set free from the power of sin and death. Set free to love your neighbor. And because your neighbor matters to God just as much as you do, love God by loving your next door neighbor. And your distant neighbor. In fact, it can be said that the primary way we love God, day in and day out, is to love our neighbor.

The kind of love spoken of in this text from Exodus and others is *Agape love*, a love made fully real in Jesus. This love that comes from God is not based primarily on feeling (how we usually think of love). Feelings come and go, and are not the basis for love. Agape love is heart, soul and mind. It is a commitment of one's whole being to the well-being of the other. So when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he's not telling us to feel affection for them, because that may not be possible, but to act in the best interests of that person, because that person matters to God.

And so on this, the final Sunday in our series on the Ten Commandments, we will speak of the spirit and animating force of the commandments, because, more than anything else, love tells you who God is and who we are called to be. Let me share with you a chapter in our shared history that witnesses to love.

I was in Switzerland last week with Heidi, celebrating (or was I trying to forget?) that I am now 60. Yes, we had a wonderful time and Switzerland is all it's cracked up to be, which is saying a lot (**pics 4-10**). But after we had consumed enough Swiss chocolate and Swiss cheese fondue; after we had purchased his and hers Swiss watches and Swiss army knives; after we had were done yodeling all the way to the bank

to open our discreet Swiss bank account, there were other things that got our attention about Swiss culture, history and character. Despite producing the Swiss Guard - an elite army that guards the Pope – the Swiss decided hundreds of years ago that they would be neutral in the various war games of aggression that were taking place around them. This they have largely done for over 400 years. Their flag is a symbol of this neutrality and non-aggression **(pic 1)**.

But what really took this whole notion up a notch was in 1859, when Henry Dunant, a Swiss citizen, witnessed the carnage of war while on a business trip to northern Italy. As the Austrians and the French had been doing battle, 40, 000 lay dead or wounded on the battlefield. It was at that time that Dunant felt called to step onto the battlefield to tend to the wounded, regardless of which side they were on. It was a statement about humanity, that anyone who was in need of medical assistance would be tended to. And so a movement was born, a movement of volunteers who had some kind of skill to help the wounded in battle. The movement is called the Red Cross, which soon became Red Cross International **(pic 2)**. It was clear that the Swiss take great pride in founding this movement, and it is no accident that the symbol for the Red Cross is the inverted symbol for the nation of Switzerland **(pic 3)**. And so, in the midst of the tragedy that nations fight and kill one another, a counter proposal rises up out of love, a counter proposal to the saber rattling that often characterize nations that get too whipped up about their own flag. With no incentive for personal gain or profit, there is the impulse to help the wounded, whoever they may be. And while neutrality keeps people out of conflicts altogether, the Red Cross brings them into it as healers and caregivers, picking up the broken pieces.

This whole Red Cross story is quite inspiring and moving to me. It reminds me of our role as Christians in the world and what the commandments ask: to give love a chance, to be healers, life-givers, peddlers of hope. The ravages of sin leave no one untouched in this world. Through the Ten Commandments, we are called to practice a love that protects our neighbors and seeks their well-being. We are also called to a love that picks up the pieces with and for our neighbor. Let's turn our attention to some national news.

Recently, we've all been hearing a lot about the children who are being separated from their parents at the border. This has rightfully come under blistering attack. And of all the lame excuses offered for such a course of action, the most lame has been attempts to defend this as a Christian act. As the reasoning goes, "it's too bad about the children, but the law is the law, and God always wants us to obey the law." I believe Jeff Sessions used a line very much like that.

For a follower of Christ, the question is always one of love. How we treat our neighbor - no matter who that is – is always governed by what Jesus tells us in Matthew: "Love your neighbor as yourself." So what does love require? Is separating children from their parents an act of love or is it something else?

Here's another example from the news: the wedding cake guy in Colorado, someone who clearly wants to do the right thing in the eyes of God. In refusing to bake a wedding cake for a gay couple, is he loving his neighbor? There's little question the gay couple are the man's neighbors. Is this love?

I bring up these two examples for us because they illustrate, in my mind, a misuse of a Christian devotion to the law of the God. They assume that love is subservient to the law, while nothing is farther

from the truth. The law is subservient to love and in fact is formed by it. The law, in any form is supposed to be what love looks like in the public arena. When it no longer is about love, the law is useless and must be revised.

What does it mean to show love to the families at the border or to gay couples with whom you may disagree? I think that love means you want them to have a good life, and you will do what you can, in whatever small way, to contribute to their life thriving. That doesn't necessarily mean we let everyone into the country, nor does it mean that we all agree with same sex marriage. But through it all, Jesus calls us to the recognition that our neighbors are human beings – even our enemies are human beings – and as such, we are to treat them as human beings made in the image of God. We are to love them.

What would be so bad about baking the cake for the gay couple, not because you agree with their marital status, but because you recognize this is, in fact, who they are: broken people like you and me, trying to find companionship and love in this world and be whole and contributing human beings. And now you have a chance to make a symbolic gesture encouraging them in their relationship or to discourage them by essentially saying you want nothing to do with them. Well, if we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves, this means that regardless of compromises you think they're making, it's better for them to have a good life together in a stable, committed relationship than in a painful, fractured one. That it's better for society if their relationship makes it than it is if it breaks apart.

For an increasing number of people in our society, when they think of Christians, they do not think of love. What they think of is self-righteous, unyielding people who seem more angry and hateful than loving. People who love the law more than they love people. Again, that's a problem, because any good law exists to make sure that people are loved and protected, so that their lives might thrive.

The Ten Commandments remind us that we are shaped by love and called to love. May your life be a testimony to the idea that all you need is love. Amen.