

One follows the other

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on October 26, 2008, the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

He said to them, "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."
Matthew 22:36-40

We've all grown weary of the negative rhetoric of the political campaign. In the 1920's, there was a President, Calvin Coolidge, known as "silent Cal," because he felt that you can't be criticized for what you don't say. There is the story of a woman seated next to the President at a dinner who told him that she had made a bet that she could get him to say at least three words. To which the Mr. Coolidge replied, "You lose."

Jesus was constantly being challenged by those who accused him of flaunting sacred traditions. When confronted, he had a way of getting through to the essentials with few words as possible. The experts of the law ask him which of all the 613 laws is the greatest. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy, (6:4) "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. He then quotes from Leviticus, (19:18) "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." These two great commandments sum up all the laws and all the teachings of the prophets. Whatever we believe about following rules and tradition the order of human relationships comes down to loving God and loving our neighbor as we would love and respect ourselves.

Abraham Lincoln, born two hundred years ago next February, received little formal education, yet had an extensive knowledge of the Bible. The reason is obvious because in his time, children learned to read family Bible as one of the few books they had. His eloquence in writing and speaking was brief and simple, yet very profound. Though he was secretly baptized in a river before his first inauguration, he never formally joined a church because he felt that most membership requirements were too complex. He once stated that he would join the church whose sole requirement for membership was to love God with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself.

The great commandment to give our whole selves to loving God requires that it must be through our own personal experience. It means allowing God, "from whom no secrets are hid," to reach right to the very heart of our being. The second great commandment is to love or respect others as we would respect ourselves. We are not able to love and respect others until we have learned to love and respect ourselves.

Loving and liking are not the same thing. We are not expected to like everyone. That's impossible. Nor can we expect everyone to like us. We can learn to love and respect our neighbors as fellow human beings with all the same human needs and feelings as we have. It helps to remember that God loves those whom we most dislike just as much as God loves each and every one of us. Even so, we can't help but think that the dumb things we do and say from time to time are an unending source of humor for God. Mark Twain once said that God created man because of being disappointed in the monkey!

To love and respect our neighbor begs the question of who our neighbor is. Our neighbor is anyone who affects our lives. Our neighbor is our parent or sibling or child with

whom we sometimes find it difficult to exchange a civil word. Our neighbor is our spouse with whom we haven't been out to dinner in six months. Our neighbor is the stranger on the street who doesn't have anywhere to go at night and who would never choose to live that way. Our neighbor is that misguided religious fanatic whose grudge against other religions becomes violent. Our neighbor is anyone and everyone in need of God's love.

Some years ago, a Hollywood actress, suffering from severe depression, wandered the streets for weeks and months. When the homeless people took her into their shelter, she exclaimed that she didn't belong there wrapped in a blanket and living in a cardboard box. The response of the others there was, "Neither do we."

Our neighbor is to be neither avoided nor used, but to be loved in spite of we may sometimes feel or think about them. They deserve the same consideration that we would want for ourselves. We all belong to the same human race and all of us have the same basic human needs. If we are to learn to respect basic human rights, we have to rise above the old law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth which only results in a blind and toothless generation whose vengeance is never satisfied!

Christianity is more than a philosophy; this is a faith and a way of life. Philosophy attempts to answer the great questions of life. The Christian faith may not have all the answers, but it helps us to live with our questions. It helps us to come to grips with life issues. Christianity enables us to respect the fact that all of us need and deserve God's love. In the final analysis, our Christian faith gives meaning to our lives and enables us to trust God when we can't make sense of what is going on. What is at the heart of my faith is learning to live with what I don't understand. In this time of economic uncertainty and world tension, it is all the more important to ask the right questions in the hope of living into some of the answers.

I have a silk screen art work by the Boston artist and Roman Catholic nun, Sister Mary Corita Kent. She will never be made a saint because she challenged church authority and eventually left the order. This is reflected in the word "ornery" written backwards in ecclesiastical purple. In the background it reads, "Hip deep involvement." What really holds meaning for me in this work is the quote by the German poet Rainer Rilke that reads: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not seek the answers that cannot be given you. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."