

WISDOM ON ONE FOOT

21st Sunday After Pentecost
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Church of the Holy Trinity
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Matthew 22:34ff.

There's a story in Jewish texts about a man who visits Rabbi Hillel. He offers to convert if the rabbi can teach him the entirety of the Torah while standing on one foot. (The Torah is the first five books of our Old Testament, which contains the Ten Commandments and the law of Moses.) Hillel raises one foot off the ground and answers, "What is hateful to you, do not do unto your neighbor; this is the entirety of the Torah. All the rest is commentary. Go study!"

As it turns out, God was merely clearing his throat when he gave Moses the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. Altogether, according to rabbinic tradition, the Lord handed down some 613 commandments during the time the Hebrew people spent in the Sinai wilderness. This may explain why they wandered around for 40 years before entering the Promised Land.

The Torah functions both as a criminal and civil code. It also includes a lot of rules governing diet, religious practices, sexual relations and personal hygiene. There are even some child-rearing tips thrown in. These include a prohibition against making a burnt offering of your children (something all of us need to be reminded of from time to time).

Even with 613 commandments, there is still plenty of room for interpretation. Over the centuries, thousands of rabbis have weighed in on precisely how each commandment applies in every circumstance imaginable. Their rulings were collected and codified in the Talmud, which runs to some 63 volumes.

So you see, when Rabbi Hillel was challenged to teach the entirety of the Torah while standing on one foot, he had his work cut out for him. Fortunately, the rabbi had a genius for getting to the heart of the matter. He realized the entirety of God's law can be summarized in a single sentence: "What is hateful to you, do not do unto your neighbor." How many of you recognize the Golden Rule ("Do unto others")?

Which brings us to this morning's gospel story about the Pharisee who tests Jesus by asking him which is "the great commandment of the law." (Note the word "tests" here.) Jesus did not stand on one foot when he gave his answer. But it's clear he and Hillel were drawing on the same source of wisdom. After all, they lived at about the

same time. Both were grounded in Jewish law. They also shared a genius for getting to the heart of the matter.

Jesus told the Pharisee to love God and to love his neighbor as himself. He said, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

The Great Commandment is easily summarized but not so easily put into practice. Loving God may perhaps be done in the abstract, but not loving your neighbor as yourself. Bill Belury, who was rector here long ago, told a story about preaching on this gospel passage one Sunday. A parishioner came up to him afterwards and said, "Reverend, you don't know my neighbor!"

The trouble is, we *do* know that neighbor. He's the guy who borrowed your hedge trimmer and never returned it. He's the guy who has the Trump sign in his yard — or the Biden sign — depending on your political leanings. The guy who cuts you off in traffic, then gives you the finger. The gym teacher who made fun of you in front of the other kids. The crazy lady who pushes her grocery cart full of trash bags up the street while muttering furiously to herself. The guy who's always trying to sell you something and won't take "no" for an answer. The nagging spouse, the interfering in-law, the ungrateful child, the overbearing boss, the scheming co-worker, the lazy underling — they're all your neighbors.

Lest there be any doubt on this score, another lawyer once asked Jesus who should be regarded as his neighbor. Jesus answered with a parable about a despised Samaritan who showed kindness toward a stranger. The stranger had been beaten by robbers and left half dead by the side of the road. In effect, Jesus was saying your neighbor is everyone you meet.

Now, if it's any help, I'll add this: Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor; he didn't say we actually had to like him. That may seem contradictory, but something gets lost in translation with this story. The word translated as "love" in this passage from the original Greek — *agape* — does not mean what we think it means. It would never be used for the love we have for a friend or for the love of a spouse or a child. Those are separate words altogether in Greek. "Agape" has no exact English equivalent. Even in Greek it's rarely used outside of a religious context.

One clue to its meaning may be found in how Jesus uses the word in this passage. He said, "You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*." Why did he throw in that bit about loving yourself? Why not just say "love your neighbor," period? Because in a very real and profound sense, your neighbor *is* yourself. "Agape" love is the recognition that we are all brothers and sisters under the skin, regardless of appearances.

The person who cuts you off in traffic, then gives you the finger — that's you. So is the gym teacher who made fun of you. How about the crazy lady who mutters furiously to herself? You again. Ditto the guy who's always trying to sell you something; the

nagging spouse, the interfering in-law, the ungrateful child. The overbearing boss, the scheming co-worker, the lazy underling, they're all you.

This is why Jesus tells us to love our enemies. What do we hate about them? Probably something we hate about ourselves. To behold humanity -- bleeding, belching, puking humanity -- is to see yourself in a funhouse mirror. Can you really bear to look? You're not like them -- or so you tell yourself. Then again, maybe the real problem isn't seeing yourself in the face of another. Perhaps the real problem is seeing yourself as you truly are, including the less savory parts that you can see only when projected onto others. These are the parts that only God can love. If you can accept that God loves the real you, then maybe you can bear to see yourself reflected in others. All that business about loving your neighbor as yourself now starts to make sense. It's not really about you at all — at least not you alone. It's about us.

Amen.

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