

The school of love

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God said, "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans. If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate." Exodus 22:21-27

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "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." Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. Matthew 22:34-46

Some of us will remember a best-seller from years ago that was titled *Children's Letters to God*.¹ Some of those letters were later turned into a 12-month calendar, a copy of which our family received as a gift. The September letter was from Denise, who wrote, "Dear God, *Fourth Grade was a lot harder than third. Does it keep going like that?*"

I wonder how you or I might answer Denise on behalf of God. We might reassure her that many things will get easier or better. And we might also wonder if or how we should validate her concern about life after fourth grade. What would we say about all that will become more complex and more daunting?

How could we tell Denise that many of the easier and better things, as well as many of the complex and daunting things, will arise in the realm of love. In different kinds of relationships at different times, she will experience curiosity, intrigue, heart palpitations, laughter, and mutual trust and comfort. There will also be hurt, misunderstandings, betrayal, unfulfilled longing, and unanswered questions.

If she is still living, Denise would now be in her 60s. She likely learned that fifth grade *was* harder than fourth, and since then she's likely learned that life would 'keep going like that.' Hopefully, along the way, Denise also received a meaningful Christian catechism, whether called that or not and whether formal or informal. Denise may have learned, as we have, that the true meanings of life and love may be elusive, but Jesus seems to hold some key, or to be, himself, the answer to our most genuine and profound questions and aspirations.

In today's gospel passage from Matthew, a lawyer appears to be looking for more schooling. He asks Jesus: *What commandment in the law is the greatest?* Before hearing the answer we should know that the question was likely more diabolical than sincere. One scholarly translator argues that the Pharisees for whom the lawyer is spokesperson have not merely gathered but have gathered *against him*. They intend to harm Jesus. And a Greek verb in the text indicates that the lawyer is not merely *asking*. He's *interrogating*.²

The treachery of these inquisitors makes the answer of Jesus more potent, and also, in the larger context, ironic. Imagine Jesus looking the devious lawyer right in the heart when he says, *The greatest commandment is to love. Love God, and do it with all you've got.*

In a few days, these same Pharisees will compile their evidence and file their charges. Jesus will be betrayed, tortured, hung on a cross, mocked, and laid in a tomb. All of it will seem to negate love in favor of power and violence. A few days later, Jesus will rise from the tomb. Because of it many of us will say that love wins after all. And Jesus will have shown us the truth of that. Jesus will also have shown that genuine love often looks like and can be inseparable from sacrifice and suffering and death.

As we all know, when the lawyer asks about the greatest commandment, Jesus responds not with one but with two commandments. Love God. And love your neighbor as yourself. Why two commandments instead of one? Jesus knew and wanted to emphasize that these two commandments are inseparable. You and I may and do point to the God of love by way of words and creeds or a glorious mass setting or our daily piety, but we truly know love and we truly make love known only if also in the fabric of life, in the real day-to-day and unexpected circumstances that require our patience when others are nasty and unforgiving, our generosity when others are greedy, our tenderness when others are cruel, our perseverance when others throw in the towel.

Sometimes true holy Love may summon us to wade into conflict. The summons may, for the moment, look less like love and more like community organizing or a prophetic call to justice and public accountability. This is arguably the intention of the lesson from Exodus appointed to be read in conjunction with today's gospel. The One who self-identifies by saying "... *I am compassionate*" begins by commanding, *'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.'*

How can we not think of the news this week about the more than 500 children intentionally separated from their parents at our nation's southern border? We could of course argue until we were red - or blue - in the face about how many children or who brought them across the border or who built the cages and the origins and intractability of our nation's decades-long immigration quagmire and tragedies. But even with our disagreements we should be able to find common ground on our responsibility to weigh and comprehend and respond to matters of politics and social policy as matters of faith. We consent to this, though we often fall short, in the last question of our Baptismal Covenant: *"Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"* *"I will, with God's help."*

The tragedies of immigration may seem beyond the reach of many of us. But all of us do know someone, some neighbor, some household, in need of some form of love that we can give, even if the word love is never used. And the giving in love may be awkward, may backfire, may be misunderstood. Even so we are called to it. Even commanded, according to Jesus.

We Christians are permanently enrolled in the school of love. Our coursework mainly includes practicums: field work, trial and error, sometimes all with steep learning curves. By our perseverance and by grace, we make it through third grade, and then fourth and fifth and beyond. By perseverance and by grace, we may even on occasion fulfill the first and second commandments of our loving God. Amen.

¹ *Children's Letters to God*, Eric Marshall and Stuart Hemple, PB Special, 1966.

² Dr. D. Mark Davis. from his blog, leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com