

THE DOUBLE LOVE DEMAND OF CHRISTIANITY

November 5, 2006 – Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ

The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

The words we hear from Scripture today are very familiar to us. We understand it as the Summary of the Law. This is the double commandment of God that Jesus uses to summarize the entire law of his faith community. The words have been spoken before in Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. My New Testament professor, Reggie Fuller, said Jesus understands the connection between these two readings in a radical sense. The Love of God is FALSE if it doesn't act in Love of Neighbor. The Love of Neighbor is self-love if it doesn't proceed from the Love of God.

What we are presented with this morning is a call to Christian duty. We are to live out love in our lives. What we need to be asking ourselves: Where do we do love? What do we love? Who do we love? We might start right here at home and consider those around us that are unloved and often invisible. What comes to mind are the poor, the stranger, the homeless and the mentally ill. We might also consider those who are "different" from us. Maybe its the members of Mt. Pisgah AME Church who are meeting in our auditorium today. Maybe it is the Hispanic community of St. Andrew's in Camden or the immigrants that make up a large part of the city.

What Jesus is calling for from us is not a legal response. This is not about posting our love commandment on a wall. It's about living love! When we do, we are loving God ... and we will meet the divine. Jesus is providing us with the clearest way to understand what we are to be about as a Christian community. Are we up to the task of living as lovers?

It's interesting to look at what Mark is writing in the Gospel today. This understanding of God and love comes while Jesus is in Jerusalem. He has already faced the religious leaders over the questions of authority, taxes and emperor. Now Jesus is asked to share what he understands as the FIRST commandment. What's at the core, or center, of our faith? We need to understand that in Jesus' day, there were nearly 700 commandments! Wow! A summary is okay, isn't it? What's at the center, that's the question put to Jesus. What's the heart of the law.

Jesus answers the question. The first commandment is to love God. This is known as the Shema. Every good Jewish person could recite this by heart. Jesus adds that we are to love God with all our heart, soul and mind ... all of us! But Jesus doesn't stop here. He has that way of going off in an unexpected direction. Jesus continues that the second commandment is like the first, to love your neighbor. What? Why is Jesus doing this? Two commandments are needed to summarize the law? Yes!

Jesus is talking about "agape" here ... the kind of love that is not feeling but is grounded in doing. This love requires action! Jesus challenges us to live out love of God by loving others. In the Gospel of Luke, this passage is followed by the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is pressing us today to widen our understanding of love and who's our neighbor. Christian love finds expression in concrete acts. We must look at every level of our lives, look beyond ourselves and see who is our neighbor. Then we have to decide what action we will undertake to show that love.

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Henri Nouwen writes about this in a book called “Gracias!” In it he describes a visit to an orphanage in Peru. As Nouwen walk around the grounds and in the buildings, children ran to him, clinging and clammering for attention. He said that these children were starved for affection. After his visit, Nouwen wrote that the children wanted only one thing ... love. They sought it in touch, hugs, strokes and acknowledgements. Many of this know what this is like. At my first visit to Kids Alley Café in Camden, one pretty, small dark haired Hispanic girl came up to me. She asked me if I would be her father that day, because she didn’t have a dad ...

Nouwen wrote most adults have the same needs. The biggest difference is that we don’t express those needs. He added that humanity is a sea of people starving for affection. Apparently our need for love is going unmet in our culture. Nouwen believes people are crying out, “Please love me” and the cries are growing louder. When we don’t love one another, we resort to destructive impulses. Who do we know, or meet, that needs love? Do we understand that every human being wants to be loved?

There is another story of a depressed woman and her husband who took her to a psychiatrist to find help (from Sermon Writer). The doctor listened patiently to the woman. After a short while, he got up in the presence of the woman and the husband. He put his arms around her and gave her a big hug! Immediately the depression lifted! The woman’s eyes grew bright with light. The doctor turned to the husband and said, “See, that’s all she needed. Do you know what to do now?” The husband replied, “Well doctor, I’m pretty busy, but I’ll see if I can bring her around to you on Saturdays.” Do we understand what it takes to love? It’s not something to leave to others to do ... we are to love God and love others. This is our job!

Why is it so hard for us to love? Is there anyone here who feels they could use a little love today, if so, raise your hand (several hands go up). What are we going to do about it? Are we going to make excuses, complain that we are too busy, or go looking for someone else to do the loving? Maybe it’s time for us to start living like we love God and others. We can start here today.

There is a two-step program that Jesus commands us to live ... love God and love others. It’s time for us to learn and live what Jesus wants. It’s time for us to love God by giving love. Let’s try to live into that today by sharing hugs with the people around us during the peace. There’s not enough love in the world. Let’s start by making sure we live and love here, today, right now. Amen.