

Sermon for Sunday, June 10, 2012
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Caring for our Neighbor
Matthew 22:34-40 & Leviticus 19:9-18

Matt. 22:34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Caring for our Neighbor

Conway Road is the path from my neighborhood to the world. It's a winding two-lane road, speed limit thirty-five miles per hour, with lots of hills and trees. It's wide enough for bike lanes in some places, and alarmingly narrow, with no berm, in others. Most of the way it's a great road for cyclists and many ride it on weekends. Some are fast and skillful. Others, slow and wobbly. When they climb the hills and the road narrows, they bring the traffic down to their speed – eight miles per hour.

What do you think when a bicycle slows down auto traffic on a hill? I confess that it annoyed me at first. Why do they choose my road? It's narrow and steep. Can't they find something safer? Easier? Out of the way – my way?

Then dozens of cyclists entered my life. Friends and family and I saw things through their eyes. I heard stories: Drivers cursing, shouting, "Get out of my way." They drive close, cut them off, sometimes even tap riders on purpose.

State law says a cyclist has just as much right to a road as a car. They are no more in our way than we're in their way. One day it dawned on me that God's law speaks to this too. When cyclists ride and drivers motor on a road, we are neighbors and Jesus says we should love our neighbors as ourselves.

It took me a while to see cyclists as my road neighbors, people I should love and protect, since they are so vulnerable as they share roads with hulking cars. It set me thinking: Do I see the people I meet as my neighbors? Do you? Do we see, or fail to see, the people around us?

1. The teaching of Jesus

Jesus said, "Love your neighbors" and he saw and loved his neighbors. This is one of Jesus' perfections – his words and deeds cohere so completely. He loved his nearest neighbors, his disciples, and he loved those who *became* his neighbors for an hour or so. When word of Jesus' arrival spread in Galilee, he healed thousands who became his neighbors. He fed the hungry, healed the sick.

One day Jesus traveled to a small town called Nain. As he tried to go in, a funeral procession came out with a middle-aged woman leading. Who is she? Who died? It was a young man: "The only son of his mother, and she was a widow." What could be more tragic? When a widow loses her only son, she is alone in the world. She faces real poverty. Tradition said Jesus could fall in behind the procession. Anyone could join the mourning. But when Jesus saw her, his heart went out to her. He became her neighbor and said, 'Don't cry.' Breaking all custom "he went up and touched the coffin." The procession stopped. "He said, 'Young man, I say to you, get up!' Then the dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother" (Luke 7:11-17).

Jesus didn't see *strangers* at the city gate, he saw neighbors. He didn't see a procession blocking his way, he saw a divine appointment with a grief-stricken woman. He didn't see an interruption, he saw mourners and neighbors. He felt compassion and acted. Jesus said, 'Become a neighbor' and he did so.

What do you see when you bump into someone, when they block your path – strangers or neighbors? And if you see, do you become a neighbor?

Not everyone treated Jesus as he treated them. On the day Jesus said, "Love your neighbor" he endured hostility. The leaders in Jerusalem thought of Jesus as a rival, a usurper. They tested him with a series of questions, hoping to trap him. They asked about authority (21:23) taxes (22:15-17) and the resurrection (22:23-28). Jesus answered each one. In fact, he did so well that the Sadducees quit trying. But one Pharisee made a final attempt to catch Jesus in a mistake (22:34).

"An expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law' (22:35-36)? The teachers debated this, so whatever he said, someone would disagree. More, the question invited Jesus to single out one of God's laws as the greatest. But God had given ten commands. If he chose one as supreme, would they accuse him of neglecting the others?

But Jesus had a solid answer ready: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment" (22:37-38). This is from Israel's great confession in Deut 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God... is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

Jesus changes the quotation slightly. Moses said to “love the Lord with heart, soul and strength.” Perhaps because he's with a teacher, he says, "Love the Lord with heart, soul and mind" (22:37). Other times, Jesus commands us to love with heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27). These slight variations Jesus makes a larger point. We should love the Lord with all our faculties.

- We love God with heart and soul when we embrace him in our deepest convictions and commitments.
- We love God with the mind when we see and know the world as he does.
- We love God with our strength when we dedicate our body, emotions, energies.
- So we love God with all our faculties, even those the Bible doesn't name - our senses, feelings, passions - as Jesus did.

Love of God the source of love of neighbor

Our theme is care for neighbor. Let's put that in perspective. Before Jesus said "Love your neighbor" he said, "Love the Lord your God." John the beloved says, "We love because God first loved us." Paul says, "The love of God has been poured into our hearts." That's the *source* of love for our neighbor.

Let's pause for this. The Bible teaches us to serve the Lord, obey the Lord, fear the Lord. Why did he say love is prime? Calvin says our free service most pleases God. If anyone hopes to *obey* God through life, he must love God first. “God will not have a forced obedience, but wishes service to be free and spontaneous.”

The same holds for love of neighbor. The best is free and spontaneous, so natural that we are scarcely aware of it. Think of Jesus again, as he entered Nain and met the funeral procession. He broke customs, which said a stranger could fall in behind the procession or move on. He broke laws that said no one should come in contact with the dead, lest they be unclean for a week.

But Jesus touched the bier, the stretcher where the youth lay. In compassion he told the mother, "Do not weep." In power, he told the man, "Arise" (Luke 7:11-17). And he rose. This is the free and spontaneous love of the Lord – our hope and our model.

2. Love of neighbor

My mother often modeled love for me. As my father's Alzheimer's disease and heart problems progressed, he had to move to places that offered ever more intense assistance. Yet my mother remained in contact with my father's first residence home, where he lived early in his illness. The home had twenty-four residents. My mother knew each by name.

She started a little chapel service for them on Thursdays. She gathered the people, played the piano, led a few hymns, read Scripture, explained it simply, and prayed. This continued for years after my father left.

Once I visited my parents over a Thursday. I knew her routine, but thought my mother might get a substitute so we could have more free time. She had another plan. First, I would help lead the singing. Then I would bring a message and afterward, I would juggle for them. "Some of them remember that you juggled for them last year," she explained. "And they liked it!" She said this in a way that implied the discussion was closed. And that's what we did.

On the way home, I asked my mother why she kept going to the home. "Dad's home is in the opposite direction and you already watch over a dozen neighbors." She thought a moment and said, "I've become very attached to them." I said, "The way you love those people is remarkable."

She looked away, "I never thought I was doing something special." For years, she gathered people to whom she owed nothing, yet it never occurred to her that it was special? Why not? Because love of God and neighbor moved her.

If we do good as a duty, it can feel like a burden. We know that we're "doing good." Every good or bad deed counts. The "gospel of works" constantly urges us to do more. It says, "Be a better person. Behave better. Follow the law. If not, you'll lose God's favor." If you follow the gospel of works long enough, you'll be tempted to give up, to despair, to drop out. No one is good enough for it.

Someone said, "You can only do what you love." That's not literally true. We change diapers, file taxes, and study for exams, whether we like it or not. But if we love the baby, the diaper is different. And if we love the teacher, the test is too. When we love, the service is light. If we love our work, overtime is easier. If we love a cause, one defeat hardly thwarts us.

If we love God, we want to please and obey Him. We may hardly notice the effort. My mother never noticed her labor because she loved the people, the singing, the Scripture. It's pleasant to do what we love for people we love, because God loved us first. Then, perhaps to our surprise, we change:

- We want to visit people in nursing homes, prisons and hospitals.
- We want to help lead a group or drive someone to the airport.
- When someone wrongs us, we hope to make peace, not taste revenge.

In Ezekiel, the Lord promised, "I will... put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will... be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God" (Ez 11:19-20). A new heart increases our capacity to love.

Love of Neighbor (Matt 22:39-40)

Remember how this message began. Someone asked Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." But he continued: There is a second law that's like the first: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." Let's define the key terms.

First, a "neighbor" is anyone who enters our life. Family, friends, co-workers, teammates, cyclists, servers. Everyone we meet *becomes* our neighbor (Luke 10:25-37).

Second, we love our neighbor as ourselves. Sadly, certain people dislike themselves. It's tragic when someone decides they hate their life, even their character ("I'm a bad person"). But a man who hates himself still loves himself in a sense: He cares about himself. He tries to feel better - or at least he justifies his misery. Everyone seeks his own good. So everyone should seek his neighbor's good.

Third, all the duties named in the law and prophets hang or depend on love. A necklace hangs around the neck and ornaments hang on a tree. So everything the law command "hangs" or "depends" on the love that generates obedience. How?

2. The law of love, the law and the prophets

Someone said Love is the motive [and] organizing principle for all we do. "Love unites and protects the virtues."¹ Love is the *greatest* command, but not the only command. "Perhaps if love were perfect, it might fulfill every command." But "in this life love is never perfect" therefore we need the other laws.² God's law teaches how to love.

- We love God when we worship Him, and treat his name and deeds with respect
- We love our parents when we honor them.
- We love our neighbors when we protect their life.
- We love our spouses when we are faithful to them.

¹ Davies, 3:246.

² Moo, "Jesus and the Mosaic Law," 1984 3-11.

- We love neighbors we respect their property.
- We love neighbors when we tell the truth *to* them and *about* them.
- We love them when we will their good rather than coveting their goods.

Take the Sabbath, a law we often ignore today. God gave Israel a *weekly* Sabbath. Master and servant, parent and child – everyone rested, even the animals. Beyond that there were annual festivals – three weeks of rest and celebration for all. In the Sabbath year, slaves were set free and debts released, "so there will be no poor among you" (Deut 15:1-18).

This shows "the sovereignty of the Lord over time itself." We are not the masters of time – he is. Meditate on that as you make your plans, as you say, "I want this or that and I want it now!" The Lord is sovereign over time – and this holds for everyone. You see the benefit of this for the working population.

In Israel work was not divided horizontally along class lines, such that slaves and peasants did all the work while the more privileged could enjoy leisure. Rather, it was divided vertically in time, by the rhythm of the Sabbath. All should work, and all should enjoy rest, including slaves. This was God's form of employee protection. It prevented exploitation of the poor by forcing them into endless labor (Amos 8:4-6).

If you have responsibility for the schedules of people who work for you, please practice this. Give your people a day of rest, the Lord's day, if at all possible. If you own a store, close on Sundays. If you oversee work that must go on every day – such as medical care - be sure you give people a day off. And believers, ask for a day off. Help your boss do what's right.

Laws of compassion

A great deal of God's law came to Israel as a nation. God's laws governed war when Gentiles invaded. There was property law and a penal code, which told the people how to punish theft, fraud, murder or injury. But a great deal of the law was unenforceable. Some told people how to love their neighbors. Leviticus 19:9-18 is a clear case. It ends with the command Jesus cited "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). A whole series of laws leading up to it teach us how to love.

First, one law protects the weak by giving them dignity. The law considers the poor who have no land and no work. Leviticus 19:9-10 says:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall

leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 19:9-10 English Standard Version (ESV)).

First, politically, we see that people should be allowed to work to gain basic food by hard work. This is noble, not menial. Even Jesus worked with his hands. Peter was a fisherman, Paul a tent-maker. It's good to work with our hands.

Then notice the interest in the poor, who have no land, and the sojourner or foreigner, who lacks social protection. This shows God's interest in poor, widows and orphans. Notice the motive: "I am the Lord." What does that mean? Do it because I command it? No, rather the laws of compassion rest in God's character.

God's people should be compassionate to the weak, enslaved and poor because God is compassionate. God showed compassion to Israel when they were poor, slaves: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this" (Deut 24:18 New International Version (NIV)).

Love also includes concern for human dignity, for the weak and disabled. Leviticus 19:14 says, "Do not *curse the deaf* or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD." Do I need to explain this? The cruel curse the deaf. They mock the blind by moving the furniture so they stumble and fall. Some think it's funny. God says: "I'm the Lord, and if you know me, you know better."

In general, all laws promote love by protecting basic rights. The Law protects what is most dear to us and to our neighbors. The sixth commandment protects life itself. The seventh commandment protects our family. The eighth protects the property that lets us live. The ninth protects our honor and good name. Luther said, "For it is miserable to live in public disgrace and contempt." So the law protects our right to life, family, property, and reputation.

See 19:11, how the laws in Leviticus clarify the way the law teaches us to love. We read "Do not lie. Do not deceive one another. Do not swear falsely... Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him. In Lev.19:16, "Do not go about spreading slander among your people." So *no form* of lie or deceit or cruel speech is permitted. Lies destroy our name, our ability to work.

This is very similar with property. We read "do not steal. Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him. Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight." This covers every way to steal – force and stealth. Also, deception and brute denial, "I'm not going to pay you – try and sue me."

The law stresses care for the defenseless – the blind, the deaf, the poor, the day laborer. But the law defends everyone. Leviticus 19:15 says, "Do not show partiality to the *poor* or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly."

Leviticus concludes in 19:16-17: "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life..." No harm in deed or in thought: "Do not hate your brother in your heart." Moreover preserve their soul, care for the spirit. Don't stand by silently as they head for spiritual death. Therefore, "Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt."

In all this, the law teaches us "Love your neighbor as yourself." Finally, "I am the LORD." That is, if you know me, you know how to love. How so? See the world my way. See all the brokenness, the sin, the tragedy, the deaths, the sorrow and disappointment, the heartache. And see all these people as *neighbors*. Not outsiders, others, losers, *neighbors*.

Act like a neighbor, become a neighbor, Jesus says. Why? Because the Father became friend and neighbor to Israel. Because Jesus became our neighbor, taking flesh and blood, walking among us as ordinary man.

It's his character - to see, to care, to feel compassion, to act. The widow at Nain. And taking care of our sins, sacrificing himself to atone for them, to reconcile us to God. Coming near, to feel, to comfort, to wipe the tears from eyes, to act. Someone said, "You can give without loving, but you can't love without giving." It's true of us, but it was true of God first. Love for God, love for neighbor, because he first loved us. All the rest is commentary.

Of course none of us can do this adequately That's why Jesus took human flesh, walked among us, died and rose again, for us, his neighbors.