

“Love God. Love Your Neighbor. Change the World.”  
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Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, VA  
Proper 25 – October 29, 2023  
Deuteronomy 34:1-12, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46

Deuteronomy 6:4-5, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” These verses are known as the Shema, the central affirmation of the Jewish faith. Jesus and the Pharisees would have known them well.

Leviticus 19:18 “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” I remember when I discovered that “love your neighbor as yourself came from Leviticus. There amongst the holiness code and all the specific statutes and ordinances about sacrifices and dietary restrictions was the golden rule. God had been saying it all along.

There’s a story that first century Rabbi Hillel once paraphrased this verse for a non-Jew who wanted to convert saying, “Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is all the Torah, the rest is commentary. Go study.”<sup>1</sup>

Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 are the two pieces of scripture, the two verses out of all the Torah that Jesus chooses when he answers the question of the Pharisee, “Which is the greatest commandment in the law?”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30/commentary-on-matthew-2234-46-6>

Love God. Love your neighbor. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. In other words, that is all the scripture; the rest is commentary. Go study.

Sounds like a pretty good sermon to me. I could end right there. Or I could unpack it for days. How about I just say a few more things, and then we can all go ponder and study these core instructions and how God calls us to live into them.

Love God. Love your neighbor. The message at the core of our faith. The two commandments which contain everything else. If you've listened to Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preach in recent times, you'll note that he adds a third sentence. Love God. Love your neighbor. And, love yourself. That's certainly important because you can't love someone as you love yourself if you don't love yourself.

The challenge with love God, love your neighbor is how simple it is to say and how difficult it is to live. What does it even mean to us?

First of all, we have to define what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. What about all the times we choose something other than God? When we'd rather do something else besides read scripture or pray or come to church. Does that mean we're not loving God with our whole selves? Loving God isn't that hard, at least most of the time, at least when things are going our way. But loving God with our whole heart, soul, and mind? All the time? It seems impossible.

And then there's the whole loving our neighbor thing. It's easy to love the people who look like us, think like us, act like us. But other people can be so "*peopley*." Our *other* neighbors are irritating and drive their cars slowly in the fast lane and say and do unkind things. Some of our neighbors have signs in their yards for political candidates whom we loathe. Some of our neighbors seem, quite frankly, unlovable.

One commentator explains, "The 'love' that is being called for is not emotion; it is not 'liking,' 'getting along with,' 'desiring,' or 'feeling warm about.' The 'love' Jesus is talking about here is trust, loyalty, enduring devotion, being attached to. You may actually hate your neighbour, but you will still love them in the Biblical sense if you continue to act for their well-being..."<sup>2</sup>

Love as trust, loyalty, enduring devotion – that's the love that Jesus is commanding us to show God. Putting our hearts, minds, and souls into the care of God and trusting God with everything in our lives. We can trust and love God while watching Netflix or at work or while we're driving or while caring for our loved one or even in the midst of a challenging day. We can love God imperfectly just as we are imperfect, and that can be enough.

We can also continue to act for the well-being of our neighbor. Whether we like them or not. I can remember as a child saying something like, "I have to love you, but I don't have to like you."

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<sup>2</sup> David Ewart, <https://www.holytextures.com/2023/08/matthew-22-34-46-year-a-pentecost-october-23-october-29-proper-25-ordinary-30-sermon.html>

And it's true – loving our neighbors doesn't mean we have to like, agree with, or invite them over to dinner. We can act for the well-being of someone we don't like.

We do a lot of things here at Bruton to act for the well-being of others. Examples: Guides, Outreach, etc.

My guess is that many of us here are doing our best each day to love God and to love our neighbor. We fall down, we get discouraged, we get back up, we try again. We do our best and hope that's enough. And, with God's help, it is.

The Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Herodians were not looking for God's help – they were looking to entrap Jesus, to get him off the streets and out of commission as it were. They were scared of that Jesus' teachings and followers were going to change things and upend the uneasy alliances they had formed. They had often been focusing on the lesser points of the law in their practices while missing the main point.

And Jesus pointed it out. He not only bested them at their game of entrapment by then asking them a question they couldn't answer, but more importantly he showed them another way. His way. The way of love. The way of good news for all who are willing to put their trust in him. The way that did upend everything.

Some years ago, the Diocese of Ohio invested in some billboards. They were trying to raise the profile of the Episcopal Church in their region. Each billboard had a message followed by the phrase, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." The messages on the billboards were:

Welcome, regardless.

If you're looking for a sign from God, here it is.

God loves you – no exceptions.

And. Love God. Love Your Neighbor. Change the World.

When we love God, fully putting our wills and our lives into the care of God, and when we love our neighbors, working on their behalf, respecting their dignity, seeing the image of God in them, regardless of how we personally feel about them, we do change the world. One heart, one soul, one loving act at a time.

It might feel inadequate. We can't end the wars in Ukraine and Russia or Israel and Gaza. We can't stop a shooter in Maine or all the violence that happens every day.

Note that the slogan does not say Save the World. That is not ours. That belongs to the one in whom we put our trust, the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who loved God so much and loved us so much that he gave himself up to death; and rising from the grave destroyed death and made the whole creation new. We do not need to save the world; indeed we cannot, for Christ already has. What we can do, with God's help, is the sweet labor of loving and trusting the one who made us, and then responding to our creator's unimaginable love for us by working through our fears and resentments and worries and traumas and griefs and prejudices and hurts so that we can love everything and everyone else whom God has created.

Love God, Love Your Neighbor, Change the World. May it be so.

