

Date: August 18, 2013

Title: "The Two Great Relationships"

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Scripture Readings: Deuteronomy 6:4-6; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:34-40

Please pray with me. Lighten our darkness we pray, O God; and grant us the courage to walk in your light.

Good Morning:

A funny thing happened to me on my way out of the 8 a.m. service on August 4th. I extended my hand to say good morning to Rev. Cook when he said, "Sorry about the relatively late request, but would you consider being the guest preacher on August 18th?"

As soon as I processed his question, four immediate thoughts came to mind:

- 1) How far down the list of options did Peter need to go to get to me? There are many ordained and competent lay preachers in this congregation;
- 2) There was an infusion of good old self-doubt that gripped my thoughts. I'm preparing to return to full-time work at Saint Michael's College this fall. While my role will be scaled down from my previous Dean's position, it's still a new job, with new colleagues, who don't know that a late afternoon nap is part of my current routine.
- 3) My mother's face jumped into my head. My Mom, Josephine, though gone for nearly 34 years, was the inspiration for my faith's first dwelling place. I was raised in a Baptist church and my Mom's wish for me to be a preacher was discussed more than once. So I saw her face and heard her voice telling me how happy she'd be if I said yes to Peter's request;
- 4) My final thought was more practical. Last year I participated in Fletcher Allen Hospital's Clinical Pastoral Education Program. I worked as an interfaith hospital chaplain from last October through April as part of my CPE experience. About a month ago, I gave a talk at the graduation ceremony of the hospital's summer CPE unit, where, at the request of the Program's Director, I shared thoughts and reflections that I have had as a result of that Clinical Pastoral Education experience.

So here I am. My talk, a month ago, and my sermon today, is based on the scripture readings that we just read together.

"The Two Great Relationships", the sermon title, is derived from the familiar gospel story often referred to as "the Great Commandment."

While a version of the story of the Great Commandment is in all of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, & Luke), I use Matthew's gospel today for several reasons:

First of all, Matthew was a Jewish tax collector from Capernaum who collected dollars from wealthy Hebrew families for King Herod Antipas. That Herod, by the way, was the same one who ordered the execution of John the Baptist. In spite of these realities, Jesus invited Matthew into his inner circle. Matthew's personal story is one of transformation as Tax Collectors were deal makers who were not generally thought well of in Jesus' time. In fact, the Scribes and Pharisees were very critical of Jesus for associating with Matthew, a tax collector, as well as the criminal outcasts of the day, which caused Jesus to respond, "I come not to call the righteous but to call sinners".

So when Matthew wrote his gospel, decades after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, he did so with the Jewish culture of the time as his main audience, and conversion as his desired result.

To quote Peter Kreeft, a faculty member at Boston College and biblical scholar:

"Because Matthew was so concerned about convincing the Jews that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the one to whom all the Jewish prophets point, he uses far more Old Testament quotations and references than any other gospel writer -- specifically, 40 direct quotations from Hebrew scripture and over 60 references to Jewish prophecies." (end quote)

That's also why Matthew refers nine times to Jesus as the "Son of David" as Jewish prophecy foretold that the Messiah would be the literal descendent of David -- which of course, Jesus was.

So here's the story, a Pharisee lawyer asks Jesus just weeks before the crucifixion, "So rabbi, which are the greatest commandments of the law?"

Jesus' response, from Deuteronomy 6, a prayer that Jesus recited daily called the Shema -- "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind", and from Leviticus 19, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

As I was doing hospital chaplain work last year, this story came to my mind many, many times. I started focusing on the term "commandment", but what seemed to fit better the more I reflected, was the term "relationship". So, the great commandment became the great relationship.... relationship with God, relationship with neighbor..... love of God, love neighbor as self.

Allow me to break this down a bit more.

1) **Relationship with God:** In his book, *Living Faith While Holding Doubts*, our former pastor, Martin Copenhaver tells us that the English language is one of the only European languages without a verb form of the word faith. So as we talk about faith, it's a noun. As a noun, you either have it or you don't.

I prefer to think about faith as a verb -- something active, something you can work ON and work AT.

Last year, doing chaplain's work, I was "faithing" well. While it's grammatically cumbersome, I think it's theologically correct. Visiting patients and their loved ones and providing a sense of presence and comfort was potent "faithing".

Coming to worship, reaching out to another person in need; studying scripture; being in dialogue with God; working at being nonjudgmental; noticing that someone needs kindness and delivering it -- it's all "faithing".

On the days that I don't feel that I'm doing a particularly good job "faithing", I need to remember that I DO know how to work at a relationship. When I feel distant from God, I need to be honest, thoughtful, loyal, in dialogue, and as loving as I can be, sometimes in spite of myself.

When I act out of bounds or hurtful to another, I need to beg forgiveness of my neighbor and be open to receiving God's grace.

In short, I know what needs to be done in a successful relationship, so I apply those principles to my relationship with God.

2) **Relationship with Neighbor:** Let me begin by saying that I am married to a person who has, what I believe to be an extraordinary sense of what "neighbor love" means. Lucy can remarkably jump from one human need to the next, with empathy, sincerity, energy and a smile.

How do we define "neighbor" in today's culture? Who is our neighbor?

Luke's gospel story of the Good Samaritan helps us to move beyond the "person next door" definition of neighbor. The Good Samaritan is an example of the unlikely helper; help given to a stranger from a person, the Samaritan, who represented a hated culture of the time. Unexpected help from someone who's supposed to be a hated stranger -- could anything be more wonderful?

So this new covenant that Jesus promotes has a simple formula: Love God and love neighbor as you love yourself. Unfortunately, things that are simple are not always easy.

Within the statement "loving neighbor as yourself", there is the truth that not many of us think much about, or make self-love and self-care a priority in our lives.

After experiencing the chaplaincy program last year, I know that the reason that self-care and self-love are so important and relevant, is fully connected to the reality that the more settled we are with ourselves, the more fully present and helpful we can be to others. When our lives are filled with what the psalmist calls "anxious toil", it's challenging to be fully present for another person.

My prayer for each of us today, is that the two great relationships in our lives, love of God and love of neighbor, will become deeper and more meaningful as we journey on our path. AMEN.