Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Relational Stewardship: Neighbors

*Jesus is our loving neighbor who went to the cross and rose for us*

One cartoon strip I enjoy reading is called Coffee with Jesus. It is by a group called Radio Free Babylon who post them on their Facebook page. Each strip shows Jesus having coffee with one of the other characters, and they discuss a faith related topic. Needless to say there is always a lot of humor which I appreciate.

One recent strip was titled The Golden Rule and features a man named James, not my husband, who says to Jesus, “Maybe the Golden Rule needs to be amended to ‘Do unto others as they’d like done to them.” When Jesus asks why James wants it changed, he responds, “OK, take my girlfriend. Under the Golden Rule, I should get her a $1000 gift card to Home Depot instead of what she really wants.”

I would like to add the question of what person would not want a $1,000 gift card to Home Depot! Think of all the flowers and gardening equipment I could buy!

Jesus responds to James saying, “You are messing this up something serious, James.” There is a copy of the comic strip out on the Narthex table so you can read and enjoy it yourself. While I think it’s funny the comic makes a good point. At times we can overanalyze the Golden Rule until it becomes so confusing that we end up just ignoring it. Yet in our reading today from the Gospel according to St. Mark Jesus says that loving God with everything we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves are the greatest of God’s commandments.

In the reading a scribe, or religious person who would have worked in the Temple, hears Jesus disputing with Sadducees and Pharisees, and the scribe comes and asks Jesus his own question. “Which commandment is the first of all?”

 Jesus answers him, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Notice how Jesus first adds that we are to love God with all our mind, an addition to what it says in Leviticus, and then notice how Jesus equates loving God and loving neighbor together. They are both important, they go together, and you can’t separate the two.

Then notice the amazing response of the scribe. Remember this scribe would have worked in the Temple and the Temple made income from hundreds of thousands of people each year paying to have an animal sacrificed and given to God as a burned offering.

Yet the scribe says that Jesus teaching on loving God and loving neighbor is more important than all whole burned offerings. While the scribe is not saying that these kinds of offerings are bad, he is saying that Jesus teaching sums up far better how God calls us to live and how to be holy.

It might not sound like it, but this teaching of Jesus is extremely difficult and troubling. Sure, we boil it down to cute things we tell our kids like, “do to others as you would have them do to you” but how many of us do that? How many of us are even experts at part one: Love God with all your heart, and with al your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength?

Do we take time to pray to God every day multiple times a day? Do we give to God as we know we should? Do we honor God with our thoughts? Are we giving God 100% of ourselves or just the leftovers after we do what we want and what is convenient for me?

How many of us love our neighbors perfectly? How many of us even know our neighbors? Not just the neighbors who live immediately next to us, but how about the neighborhood on the other side of town? As a congregation do our neighbors immediately around the church building know us? Do they even know who we are, what we do, or why we gather?

If this is the greatest commandment then we are in real trouble brothers and sisters, because if we were perfect at it then we would have no need for Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

The good news is that God knew we would never be perfect at keeping the greatest commandment, and so God decided to come and be OUR neighbor instead.

Time and time again God sent prophets and messengers to Gods’ people to call them to once again repent and love and follow God. When the time came God decided to come down and take on flesh by being born to the faithful and obedient virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Becoming the person of Jesus Christ, God lived among humanity and creation and demonstrated perfectly what it means to love God with everything that you are, and to love your neighbors as yourself.

Jesus healed those who were sick or injured, he cast out demons from those who were possessed, he taught everyone who came to him about the Kingdom of God, and Jesus never turned away anyone. He welcomed the rich, the poor, the sick, the healthy, men, women, old, young, etc. Jesus loved everyone as his neighbor and there was always a place in Jesus kingdom for those who came truly seeking.

When the time came Jesus demonstrated the ultimate love of God and neighbor by willingly going to die on the cross so that all who have faith in him receive forgiveness of sins, a new relationship with God, and a new loving relationship with our neighbors.

In his rising Jesus brought the promised hope of the resurrection to all who trust in him so that even the powers of sin, death, and the devil are no more. In his ascension Jesus continues to pray for us, to send the Holy Spirit to help us, and to empower us to keep loving God and to keep loving and serving our neighbors.

When we gather around the font to touch the water Jesus reminds us of his love and forgiveness for us, and that we were made into children of God so we should never fear that we are beyond God’s forgiveness when we fail to love God and neighbor as we should.

When we gather at the altar to receive the gifts of bread and wine which become the body and blood of Jesus we are reminded again and again that Jesus loves us, that Jesus forgives us, and that Jesus is always giving us his very self so we can grow in faith, and daily seek to love God and neighbor with everything we are.

Jesus does all that as a free gift for us simply because that is who Jesus is: the greatest and most loving of neighbors. Amen.