

“The Sacred Cycle”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; Matthew 22:34-46

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

When we hear or read those words, our initial response tends to be, “That’s a great idea. Need to be better about that.” But if we think about it a few minutes more, questions arise, like, what does it mean, exactly, to love God with everything I’ve got? How does that work? How could someone just give it all up? Is that safe? Can we expect anything in return, or is that a wrong question to ask? Who’s my neighbor, and how do I love them like myself? What does it mean to love myself?

These are difficult questions, and we suspect that the answers might lead to changes in our lives, if we put them into practice. So it dawns on us that urgent emails need to be answered. It’s been a while since our last exercise session. The laundry’s piling up, too, and there’s this book to finish. Pretty soon, the quote from Jesus and the questions that follow start to fade away. A sense of comfort return, and we can breathe easy again

But down the line, those questions surface again, and we start to wonder why these questions challenge us so much? I think it has to do with love. Love is so powerful and precious, so essential to who we are that we dare not stop, because if we did, we’d die inside. Some people do stop and turn into emotional and spiritual zombies, but for those who choose to live and to love, it can be scary, because it’s tricky and risky and almost always painful. It’s like

the war movie where the medic says to the wounded soldier, “It’s good that it hurts. It means you’re still alive.” Loving can hurt because it means being alive.

For instance, when somebody we love dies, it hurts because we still live and love them. If somebody dies and it doesn’t hurt, you’re either in complete and total denial or you just don’t love that person. But it doesn’t take death to make love painful. Sometimes, our love is betrayed, dishonored, or unrequited. Think of a cheating or abusive spouse or an ungrateful child or a negligent parent. Think of crushes you once had for people who seemed unaware you existed. When we hope that our love will be accepted and reciprocated, and that’s denied, it is brutal.

Those types of experiences make us reluctant to love again, at least not fully, and certainly not with our whole heart and soul and mind. But the impulse to love remains. So what do we do with it? We divert it. We keep some invested in our relationships, but we diversify to mitigate the risk, ironically by loving things that can’t love us back, but which also can’t refuse or betray us.

Who knows what it might be: material possessions, an ideology, you name it. How many times have you heard or said something like, “I love my car. I love the Cats, the Cards”? And the sign of that love is our devotion that thing or idea through the sacrifice of our time or energy or money.

Now you might be wondering, “What’s wrong with loving those things?” Nothing, really, except that it’s an empty bargain. We love objects, because it’s risk free. Crash a car you love. Collect the insurance. Buy a replacement. Risk-free love, but also meaningless and dangerous.

Meaningless, because none of those things will ever love you back. When we love stuff, we’re lost in an illusion, throwing away what’s most precious on things that are transient,

impermanent. Now you might say the same about loving people, because as the Psalmist wrote, “You sweep us away like a dream; we fade away suddenly like the grass.” But at least while it lasts, that’s real, and through the grace and mercy of God, those loving relationships can endure beyond Earth. The Song of Solomon reveals that “Love is as strong as death. Passion is as fierce as the grave.” Your car will not be waiting for you in heaven, but the people you love who have gone before will be.

So it’s meaningless, loving stuff in an effort to stay safe, but how is it dangerous? To the extent we pour our love into anything other than God, we commit idolatry, and idolatry is a departure from reality that leads to meaningless fantasy. God comes first. If God isn’t at the top of our priority charts, we are worshipping idols. You don’t need a stone altar or a statue or a bleeding bull to commit idolatry. Even loving other people more than God is idolatry, but that doesn’t mean we can’t love each other, far from it. It’s about how we love.

When we love God first, we can love each other properly. One follows the other. That’s why the commandment to love God and neighbor are intertwined. It is impossible to truly love God and despise your neighbor. Conversely, it is impossible to love your neighbor unless you first love God. Until you love God, you can’t love yourself in the right way, and until you love yourself with integrity, your neighbor’s out of luck. So love God first. Then by loving yourself and others, you love God through them. It is the ultimate virtuous cycle. Does that sacred cycle make sense?

But what is love? It’s hard to say. The First Letter of John letter reveals that “God is love,” and God is a mystery beyond our comprehension. No one can fully know the mind of God, and those who pretend that they can are committing blasphemy. So since God is love and also a mystery, then it stands to reason that love itself is a mystery, too.

However, we know enough about love to do it, because Jesus reveals, through his passion and suffering, through his sacrifice on the cross that love means to passionately sacrifice for the well-being of another, for the benefit of the beloved, no matter what the cost, without concern for a return. Yet how can we possibly sacrifice anything to God? We don't actually have anything He needs.

Well, if you'll forgive the brief Latin lesson, "sacrifice" is a compound word that literally means "make holy," and holy means "to set apart." When we offer God loving sacrifice, we passionately set something apart just for Him. Like a reserved table at a restaurant, nobody else can have it but Him. And what sacrifice does God desire? All of it, every particle of who we are; our heart and soul and mind solely devoted to Him. It seems impossible, and left to our own devices it is, but the Holy Spirit inspires us with faith that overcomes fear and empowers us to believe that God will always accept our love with joy. He won't neglect it or betray it.

But if we offer up all of who we are to God, what's left for us and others? Remember that virtuous, perpetual, sacred cycle. God takes the initiative and loves us first. Then we love God first, before anybody or anything else. That establishes a relationship, a connection that opens a pipeline as wide as Texas, and God's love comes rushing through.

When we receive God's love into our hearts, humbly and gratefully, that love overflows out to others, to our neighbors. Some of them will reject it, but many will accept. When we love others, it is a consecrated sacrifice to God, and God keeps pumping out His eternal love, like blood coursing through an artery. It surges through people, magnifying exponentially as the network of relationships expands, and it was never stop.

It will be temporally impeded in its progress, yes, by everyone, including us. That's the consequence of our sinful human nature, but the love of Jesus on the cross broke the bars of sin's

prison. We just have to walk through the open door out into the light, and with every step we take with Jesus, the reign of love spreads throughout the world.

Imagine a world where the principal passion, the sole motive, of every soul was the well-being of another, united in adoration of God. I know, it's nearly impossible, but try. Try to imagine a world where the finger on the trigger doesn't squeeze, where the button that blows up the bomb isn't pushed down, where the desire to live together in peace and harmony overwhelms the hate and fear we have against those who are different – those with differently colored skin or religious beliefs or political philosophies.

Sound like a pipe dream, doesn't it, a fantasy too good to be true? Well, to a lot of people, God sounds like a fantasy, a refuge for the weak, for those unable to cope what they call reality, a dystopian world of never-ending struggle and conflict, a zero-sum game to be won at all costs, no matter who gets hurt or how much. As disciples of Christ, we know better than that. We can see through that lie. We've chosen a side and need to work for the victory where everybody can win. The way the world is now isn't how it's supposed to be, and this is not how it will be, because the justice and mercy of Christ will reign.

Imagine a world ready to forgive, to let go of grudges, petty and big, a world ready to be kind instead of vicious and vindictive; a world where lies no longer deceive. Will getting there hurt? Yes. Ask Jesus. Look at his wounds. But will it be worth it? Yes. Love is always worth it in the end, because the pain caused by love has meaning. It serves a purpose, even when the pain of love is caused by the wicked. Ask Jesus. Look into the empty tomb.

Someday, the world we're striving to imagine, the world God is recreating through us and others, that world will arise fully realized, glorious in splendor, a Kingdom that has no end.

“May the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us; prosper the work of our hands; prosper our handiwork.” Amen.