

**Proper 25A – SJ – But What Is Love?***Matthew 22:34-46 10/23/11**St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT*

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Which is the greatest of all of God's Commandments? This is the question put to Jesus. And the answer, seemingly, is not one but two: love God and love your neighbor. There are, of course, lots of stories in Christian history about people who have devoted their lives to loving God – people like St. John of the Cross or St. Teresa of Avila, who have written incredible poetry – and prose – about that love in language that makes us think of the love one lover has for another. It is language that might remind us of one of the most eloquent of St. Augustine's quotations: "Our hearts are ever restless till they find their rest in thee."

Such almost erotic longing for union with God is not, of course, limited to the Christian tradition. One hears it also in other cultures – for example in the poetry of the great Muslim poet Rumi or in the music of some from Hindu India – even, for that matter, in the sounds of John Coltrane's saxophone offering: "A Love Supreme" – which actually led in San Francisco to a church with the unlikely name of the St. John Coltrane African Orthodox Church, and to Coltrane's place as one of the icons of quite unexpected dancing saints painted on a cupola that wraps around the rotunda that makes up the inside of one of San Francisco's Episcopal churches, St. Gregory of Nyssa, certainly one of the most creative and unusual of our churches that I've ever visited. If you go to their website, you'll find a complete list of the many subjects of these wonderful icons, 90 of them, I believe – which include such other surprises as Charles Darwin, Pope John XXIII, Malcolm X dancing hand in hand with Queen Elizabeth I, and Lady Godiva, horse, hair, and, of course, nothing else.

But, let's face it, few of us are mystics, ready to lose ourselves in the kind of rapturous longing for the divine that we find in some of the great mystical writers and musicians of human history. So it is the second of the commandments that should more attract our attention. Indeed, if humans are all made in God's image, as Genesis tells us we are, if we encounter Jesus every time we feed or visit one of the least of our brethren, as Jesus suggests we should in Matthew's gospel, then we really must accept that love of neighbor is not just a second commandment, but actually a restatement of the first. Love of neighbor *is* the love of God. In this morning's gospel Jesus' call to love one's neighbor is a direct reference back to our Old Testament lesson this morning from the Book of Leviticus, in which the Jewish people are told to love their neighbor. Jesus' famous parable about the Samaritan who provided aid to the man who had fallen afoul of some bandits and was lying injured by the side of the road, is his way of making clear that that commandment ought to be applied universally, not just to people who were members of the same tribe or society as we. As such it was a form of what Jews call a *Midrash* – that is, a commentary further explaining the meaning of a scripture.

But, though the story of the Good Samaritan has been taken over the centuries as an illustration of the way in which Christian Scriptures are more universal, and therefore more to be admired than the Hebrew Scriptures, Jews also have understood the obligation of love to extend beyond their tribe. Look just a few verses further down in Leviticus, for example, and we find “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you: you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt....”

To explore just what it means to love the neighbor we may find it most difficult to love – and why we must try anyway – I’d like to turn to a book that tells a story almost beyond comprehension, so unlikely is it. Perhaps some of you know this story already. It’s told most eloquently in a book that’s in our church library: *Not by the Sword*, by Kathryn Watterson. In fact, the book is currently on a table in our narthex, right by the doors that lead into the sanctuary. If you haven’t already read it, it’s well worth reading, regardless of my brief retelling of it here, since it’s a fascinating tale indeed. It illustrates not only what it means to love one’s neighbor, but also the power such love can have. Just as Jesus was an itinerant Jewish rabbi, the person about whom the book is written, the one practicing love, is actually also Jewish clergy – a cantor at the time of the events described in the book, but now a rabbi.

Let’s turn, then, to the story that Watterson has so beautifully told. One Sunday in June of 1991, Michael Weisser and his wife were sitting in the kitchen of the home they had very recently purchased in the city of Lincoln, Nebraska, where he had been serving for a couple of years as cantor of the smaller of the two synagogues in this city of something over 200,000 that was home to the University of Nebraska (and, since it was too small to be able to support both cantor and rabbi, as rabbi as well). The phone rang, and, when he answered, the voice at the other end said only: “You will be sorry you ever moved into 5810 Randolph Street, Jew boy.” A somewhat unsettling message, given both the implied threat and that the person calling knew both that the Weissers were Jewish and where they lived. The caller was Larry Trapp, the Nebraska Grand Dragon of a neo-Nazi, white power group called the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Trapp was a man who stockpiled guns and was proud of the survivalist skills he had developed. He had filled his mind with hate not only for Jews, and African-Americans, but also for almost anyone who had a different take on reality than his. A couple of days later a package arrived at the Weissers’ home stuffed with anti-Semitic literature and an unsigned card that read: “The KKK is watching you, scum.”

It was, however, Weisser’s response to the threats, when he was able to determine that his antagonist was indeed Trapp, which is truly extraordinary. Over the next months, Weisser began two noteworthy actions. He began to pray for Trapp, and he began to initiate calls himself of a distinctly more benign nature – messages of love and offers of conversation about Trapp’s beliefs.

Trapp himself, though he was not much over 40 years of age, was physically deteriorating because of complications from the childhood diabetes that he had simply not taken seriously for too many years. His legs had had to be amputated – so he was now in a wheelchair – and his eyesight was rapidly failing. But his hate seemed to sustain him. Nevertheless, when he learned of Trapp’s physical condition, Weisser began to offer physical assistance to his tormentor – offers to drive him to the store or even to go himself to pick things up for him.

Weisser’s campaign of loving his neighbor not only succeeded in weaning Trapp from his rabid racism and anti-Semitism, but actually, by the summer of the following year, as his health continued to fail, Trapp undertook to convert to Judaism himself. His response to a question about Weisser put to him by a reporter from a Lincoln newspaper was: “He showed me such love that I couldn’t help but love him back.” Trapp died that September, less than two years after his initial expressions of hate, not only now a member of Weisser’s temple – and of the NAACP – but, having moved in with the Weissers as he continued to need more help, essentially a member of the Weisser family.

At the time Weisser first interviewed for the position as his temple’s cantor he had described love, tolerance and nonharmful behavior as the core religious values of Judaism.

“Love your neighbor as yourself!” We’re not talking about our neighbor who is the same as we are. No, we’re talking about the neighbor who is *different* from us. Tolerance requires practice. If we practice enough and become more tolerant, accepting, loving and less harmful, then we begin to attain the attributes of justice and righteousness Judaism teaches us.

Both religions, then, teach the same thing: love of neighbor that extends to all of our fellow humans, for we are all created in God’s image. And stories like that of Larry Trapp and Michael Weisser give us reason to believe that love really can make a difference in the quality of the lives we share with our fellow humans.

AMEN