Listening for the Promise

Weekly Devotional

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – October 31, 2021

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:31)

Many complicated ideas Jesus teaches require further explanation. But not this time. The critics of Jesus have entangled him in yet another argument. They ask, "Jesus, since you are such an expert on all things, tell us, which commandment is the greatest?" You can hear exasperation in their voices. And once again Jesus astounds his critics by answering their question in a way they did not expect.

"Love God and love your neighbor." Jesus simplifies things for us, reducing his sermons and teachings to a couple of easy-to-remember phrases. Or does he?

If you have honestly tried to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself, you know it is not an easy thing to do. What if your neighbor is quarrelsome or problematic? What if your neighbor is always trying to take advantage of you? Some people just can't get along with anybody, and others seem to do everything they can to anger and alienate everybody else. These are difficult neighbors to love. Still, neighbor implies someone nearby, and if you try hard, you can find something lovable in the most difficult of neighbors. We have a motivation to try and get along with somebody who lives next door to us, it's just common sense. We don't need Jesus to command us to love them!

Loving our neighbors in the way of Jesus is not easy, not because our neighbor is unlovable, but rather because of Jesus. His life, death, and resurrection changed our ideas of loving our neighbor. Jesus showed his love toward us in not only dying on the cross for us but also in returning to the same disciples who betrayed him. His resurrection appearances are linked to his forgiveness. Christ made his enemies (us) into his beloved neighbors for whom he would do anything, even dying on a cross!

The command to love God precedes the command to love our neighbor because loving our neighbor requires we look at our neighbor as Christ looks at our neighbor. It's hard to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. Maybe Jesus means here to love our neighbors as God has loved us. How did God love us? With a sacrificial, even-unto-death self-giving that is our salvation. We love because Christ first loved us. We love as those who are humbled and grateful that God called us to show God's love to all.

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