

Love God and Love People

A reflection on Matthew 22:34-46

By Cathy Warner

There's a popular song by Danny Gokey that I hear repeated every few hours on Spirit 105.3 FM called "Love God Love People," that's become the station's mantra. The refrain to this catchy tune has these lines:

Gotta keep it real simple

Keep it real simple

Bring everything right back to ground zero

'Cause it all comes down to this

Love God and love people

It's the sung condensed version of Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' question in this morning's Gospel reading. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Another question asked, not in sincerity, but in an attempt to trip Jesus up, to get him to discredit himself by saying something they could refute.

But there's no tricking Jesus. He answers: "'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.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

His answer can't be argued with, and after Jesus asks a question of his own, his interrogators sit down and stop the questions, though, as we know, they continue with their plotting to silence him.

Jesus gets to the heart of how we are to order our lives: We are to love God completely and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Danny Gokey distills these two commandments down to five words: *Love God and love people*.

The essentials might be “real simple,” as Gokey sings, but they’re not easy to live out.

Over centuries as religious people, we’ve made laws, developed theologies, built churches and cathedrals, codified rituals and customs that have often led us away from truly loving God, to worshipping our own constructs of God.

We’ve erected barriers and boundaries around those we think are God’s chosen people, those we think are worthy of God’s love, and those we think are not.

We’ve fought wars, killing those who don’t believe in the *true* God—which is always our God—and persecuting those who don’t worship the *right way*—which is always our way.

As Jesus says, the law and all the messages of the prophets hang on these two commandments: to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind; and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We ought to be able to trace all our actions and observances, all our beliefs and practices in every area of our lives back to these core commands. But most of the time, we live on auto-pilot, crossing off the items on our to-do lists. How often, when faced with a decision, or in carrying out some task, or in responding to a crisis, do we stop to ask ourselves these questions:

Does what I think and say and do show my love for God?

Does what I think and say and do show my love for my neighbor?

Does what I think and say and do show my love for myself?

Answering yes is only easy in the abstract, only simple in a pop song. In the real life we live, in the time and place we inhabit, answering yes is hard. We might want to say yes, I love God, and my neighbor, and myself, but despite our best intentions, our thoughts and words and deeds say the opposite.

For every time we offer praise or prayers of thanksgiving, there's another time when we turn away from God when a parent or spouse or child dies. We curse God when we lose a job or promotion. We deny God's existence when a tornado or a hurricane or a fire or foreclosure takes our home.

We love God half-heartedly, if at all, keeping God not at the center of our lives, but in a tiny corner, a relic to glance at and take off the shelf occasionally on holidays like Christmas and Easter, or special occasions like marriage or birth. We treat God as a last resort, calling out for help, but not expecting it, only when nothing in our lives seems to be working the way we planned.

And as for loving our neighbor: that's a fraught endeavor. It's easy to love an abstract neighbor like someone seeking asylum at the border, or a temporary neighbor like a homeless guest at a shelter. It's easy to sign a petition, to write a check, to deliver a meal, and then go home and go about our business unchanged.

The trouble comes in loving a particular neighbor. One who lives literally next-door with abandoned cars piled on the lawn, a dog that barks all day, a cat that uses our garden beds for a litter box, a driveway lined with campaign signs for candidates we oppose. One who argues with children and spouses at the top of their lungs, or freezes their legitimate complaints with the silent treatment. One who forgets to pay the bills, leaves dishes in the sink, or dirty socks on the floor and doesn't read our minds. One who lives in the same house, who even shares the same bed.

And it's hard, maybe even hardest of all to love ourselves. We allow medical conditions to go unchecked. We don't provide our bodies with consistent or quality meals or the exercise

it needs. We live alone without help long after we are able to care for ourselves due to age or illness. We bottle up grief, anxiety, or depression, without seeking relief from prayer or therapy. We prioritize work and wealth over relationships and rest, we choose productivity and business over contemplation and presence. We stay in destructive relationships, communicate in unhealthy ways. We condemn ourselves for past mistakes, withholding forgiveness long after we've repented and made amends.

From the time of Moses to the time of the Sadducees, Pharisees, Jesus, and the Apostle Paul, from the tribes of Israel escaping Egypt to living under Roman occupation, from religious to secular and agnostic societal configurations, life is difficult. And being human with all our faults is hard. We trick ourselves into believing that living in ways pleasing to God requires absolute adherence to complicated rules and regulations. In doing so, we live by the law of judgment and guarantee failure and punishment.

But Jesus offers us another way. Not a new way of his own invention, for as he tells us in scripture, he didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. In doing so, he offers us a stripped-down bare-bones version of the essentials. We see it in the way he loves and cares for himself and his followers. With time alone for communion with God, for prayer and discernment. With time in community for food and fellowship. With learning and discussion and patience as his friends and followers grapple with his challenges to their thinking and understanding. With the clear way he uses his gifts for healing and teaching without expecting anything in return. With the way he allows others to offer their gifts and minister to him. With the clear way he engages with those determined to silence him, standing his ground and speaking the truth without resorting to violence. Modeling for us how to love God, how to love others, and how to love ourselves.

When love is the law, there are no winners and losers. Everyone is inside the circle, and no one is left out. When love is our law, there is abundance and grace and second and third and seven-times-seventy chances to make things right.

It truly does all come down to this: Love God and love people. Amen.