

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church
Lake Worth, Florida

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**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOVE GOD, NEIGHBOR, AND ONESELF?
ARE THE THREE LOVES IDENTICAL?**

an instructional homily

As I am sure many of you know, *The Summary of the Law*, which we heard in tonight's Reading (see below), is one of my favorite scriptural passages. "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." This declaration by Jesus is the one moral absolute for all Christians, an absolute principle rooted in the Old Testament (the Bible of Jesus).

By asserting "on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets," Jesus provides an indisputable, liberating *moral context* for understanding all other commandments, rules, and ethical values. In so doing, he freed us from rigid conformity to lesser, inflexible, imprisoning moral codes and regulations that too often inhibit, or even prevent, love of God, neighbor, and self.

For over two thousand years, his disciples (including ourselves) have been left with the daunting challenge of applying his *Summary of the Law* to concrete issues in particular, often unique, circumstances. Though guided by moral wisdom of the ages, faithful Christians at all times and in all places have differed sharply on the *application* of love to living issues - such as abortion, assisted death, war, capital punishment, divorce, human sexuality, our stewardship of the environment, economic justice, family structures and values, and so on. Because of our legitimate differences on so many ethical matters, within classical Anglican Christianity we agree to differ on various dilemmas of doctrine and morality. Nonetheless, in spite of our often profound dissimilarities, we *are* generally able to judge disapprovingly those behaviors that obviously exploit human beings together with actions that are intentionally unjust, clearly idolatrous, blatantly inconsiderate, consciously harmful to body and spirit, and the like.

Yet, what *basically* does it mean to *love* God, neighbor, and oneself? Are the three loves identical? We rely on scholarly commentators to help us respond to this question. What I offer tonight is drawn from these experts, not just from my own ponderings.

Concerning love of God, the Hebrew people were commanded to love God, and Jesus repeats this mandate in his own *Summary* - an adaptation of the classical Old Testament wording "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." *Our love for God, understood in the context of the covenant established at Mount Sinai, is not primarily a matter of intimate affection and certainly not a mystical yearning for a vague transcendence.* Our love for God is expressed by trusting Someone, namely *Yahweh* (a significant name for the biblical God), by showing profound reverence for God, and by being loyal to the Lord God alone. To love God is to live from moment to moment with grace-filled hearts and minds and by making the multitude of daily decisions God delegates to us. To love God is to live with enthusiasm for justice; to live with gratitude, awe, and penitence, and with sincere prayer and worship.

Interestingly, worship is the supreme act of our love for God. To worship (from "*worship*") God is to acknowledge the Creator's supreme *worth*; it is to "ascribe to the Lord the glory due his Name" (Psalm 2, v. 2). In the Bible, prayer is understood as the foremost *service* rendered to God as king.

“...worship is the only adequate preparation of the Church for its work and witness in the world as the Body of Christ. ... [Worship] is an end in itself; in it man achieves his chief end of glorifying God. There is no greater human activity than that of giving unto the Lord the glory due unto His name. Hence, for Christians the obligation of worship is absolute... It is the act not of isolated individuals but of the whole Church. ...private worship is based on corporate worship, the worship of the Church, ... a family activity.” [from Raymond Abba, *Principles of Christian Worship* (1957), Ch. 1]

Accordingly, “*Services*” of corporate worship are the most significant and fundamental expression through which human beings can love and serve God. Without corporate worship, our love for God is significantly diminished.

With regard to love for our neighbor, from Christ we learn that each of us is under an obligation to promote in personal ways the interests and significance of those with whom we come in contact, whether at home or at work. Mutual caring, unselfishness, humility, equal regard, justice, and generosity of spirit, all accompanied by God's strengthening Grace, are qualities of genuine love in all human associations. One might say that the Christian life is the loving concern for the wellbeing of people under the inspiration of, and allegiance to, Jesus and the ideals he personifies. Obviously, the intensity and responsibilities of neighborly love will vary, according to the actual relationship we have with neighbors, such as our significant other(s), family, friends, colleagues, and other assorted bonds. At times, as we attempt to love, we are called to be willing to get into trouble, to be revolutionary, and to serve as transforming agents as we progress toward becoming the Kingdom of God. **Do steer clear of those notions of neighbor-love that embrace all humanity as one's neighbor, while neglecting those people in clear view!**

Concerning loving oneself, the hardest task of all for many individuals hammered by underserved religious and cultural guilt, Christian discipleship is *not* about self-loathing, self-negation, asceticism, self-neglect, or an avoidance of all pleasure. Following Christ includes a trust in the God whose Word he exemplifies and embodies - at the same time as we live to the extent we are able, with God's grace, in accordance with his “*Summary*.” Loving God, neighbor, and self *rejects* self-indulgence, self-centeredness, self-preoccupation and conforming fully to the expectations of one's culture. In particular circumstances, however, discipleship might involve self-denial, suffering, or even death as one remains faithful. Nevertheless, self-love affirms one's self-acceptance as a unique child of God; self-love enhances a positive self-regard and equal regard in fellowship with others. **Do avoid the many versions of Christianity that neglect or minimize Christ's teaching about love of self! Such versions are extremely dangerous to the development of mature, Christian wholesomeness.**

It is safe to say that we human beings love God, our neighbors, and ourselves in different ways; the three loves are not identical. Moreover, our love is imperfect and impaired to one degree or another. At our best, strengthened by God's spirit, and by each other, we are a “work in progress.” We are all, as some would say, in the process of becoming more fully human, more loving, as the Creator intends us to be. By gathering here to worship, the process is nurtured, so that our lives are more truly lived within the Spirit of Christ's liberating *Summary of the Law*.

Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, ““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. ”

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

**‘The Lord said to my Lord,
“ Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet”’?**

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

See various related items/chapters in the ALL HANDOUTS subsite and in “Living Issues in Ethics” in the TEXTBOOKS subsite of philosophy-religion.org/. Other sermons within REFLECTIONS reflect this understanding of the *Summary*.