

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

If you have been around the Episcopal Church for a while,
this mornings Gospel had a familiar ring to it.

In the 1928 prayerbook, and optionally in Rite I of our current prayerbook,
the summary of the law is read just prior to the Kyrie.

“Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God

with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Like many of the familiar words of worship,

these words are carved deeply into my memory by a lifetime of prayer.

I was fascinated to find out that this verse was a favorite of Abraham Lincoln.

In seminary while writing a paper about him,

I discovered that Lincoln,

though he was one of the most religious presidents in his writing,

He would often quote scripture in his letters and speeches,

is the only president that was not a member of any church.

When pressed on the matter he replied

that if he could find a church that would write this verse

in large letters on the front of the altar

he would join that church.

Abraham Lincoln has always been one of my heros

and so I ask myself,

If he had the chance, would he join Grace church?

We don't have the writing on the altar, that is clear,

but it is also clear

that Mr. Lincoln wasn't talking about decorative writing.

He was talking about what we believe and how we act.

In other words,

does our church write those words large on our hearts?

Is that how we behave day in and day out?

One of the exercises I took part in last week during my CREDO retreat

was to spend time in reflection and prayer

to tunnel down deep inside me

to find what the core principles of *my* faith are.

What is the foundation

that the entire framework of my faith is built upon.

This is what I found.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul,

and with all your mind.

And love your neighbor as yourself.

It is the bedrock upon which I build all of my faith;

the absolute core of the religion I practice.

In spite of the special place we give them,

These words are not unique to Jesus.

Things like them have been said by others for thousands of years.

A Jewish contemporary of Jesus',

Rabbi Hillel the Elder,

is credited with saying,

“What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor.

That is the whole Law and all else is commentary.”

These two parts of the law,

loving God and loving neighbor,

are basically lifted from Hebrew scripture,
Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus. (19:18b)

So, Jesus isn't really saying anything new.

Earlier in Matthew,

we heard Jesus beginning his teaching by saying,

“Do not suppose that I come to destroy the law and the prophets;
I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill.”

OK, if what Jesus is saying isn't new,

why is it so important?

Where does it get the power

to stop any further questioners in their tracks?

What does it really mean to love God with our whole heart,

our whole soul, and our whole mind?

The Hebrew version from Deuteronomy is

to love the Lord your God with all your heart,

with all your soul, and with all your might.

These three Hebrew words for heart, soul, and might

(*lebab* (בְּרֵךְ), *nefesh* (נֶפֶשׁ), and *mehod* (מְדָה)) are very rich in meaning.

One of the things that I love about the Hebrew language

is it's richness and depth.

Many Hebrew words have various layers of meaning, some quite different.

Almost by design it is a poetic language.

Lebab means your heart, but also your mind.

The center of your understanding.

All that is your inner immaterial nature.

Nefesh is your soul and / or your breath. The life-essence that defines your self.

Nefesh also includes all your appetites and emotions.

Mehod is your might or strength, but it is also your wealth and capacity.

In many ways it is your will and all that derives from it.

In the end it is your “muchness.”

Now that we know more of the richness of what we are talking about,
do we love God with all our lebab,

with all our nefesh,

and with all our mehod?

With the center of our understanding,

our appetites and emotions,

our wealth and capacity?

That is a tall order and I dare say we each fall short much of the time,

but there are moments.

Ah... by the grace of God there are moments.

This love that Jesus is talking about

is not mere affection or desire

but a commitment of the whole self to another.

Today the word love has almost lost its meaning through over use.

We say we love food, or possessions, or the weather,

or any of a whole host of other things.

It is no wonder we are often disillusioned by love.

It has lost its mystery and power.

By taking these two commandments about love

and placing them next to each other,

Jesus is telling us something about love.

One of the central points of Jesus’ ministry to us,

if indeed it is not the entire point,

is the centrality and importance of love.

Love of God and love of neighbor.

Individually they can seem at times impossible, and unreachable goals.

What if combining them together was more than just an exercise in rhetoric?

What if combining them together is a way to gain access to the true reality of both?

What if that is what Jesus is really telling us?

On many occasions Jesus broke the fourth of the ten commandments,
keep holy the Sabbath day,
to help other people in need.

His understanding was
that when love of God interfered with love of neighbor
it ceased being love of God.

In that way love of neighbor informs, corrects, and improves our love of God.

In the same way,
when our love of God
empowers us to imitate the generosity and forgiveness of God
it allows us to see the humanity of all those around us,
even our enemies.

This radical expansion of our understanding of who our neighbor is
and consequent improvement and enrichment of our love of neighbor
is only made possible through our love of God.

By linking these two loves together, Jesus is giving us the key;
the key to a life lived in the kingdom of God.

Sadly, it is a key that we use all too infrequently.

Without it we continue to be blind to the humanity of the people around us.

We see enemies or at the least competitors
where we should be seeing neighbors.

It has always been hard to look around and see neighbors,
and harder still to love them as ourselves.

This is the sad reality we have lived in ever since we left the Garden of Eden.

It takes everything we have,
Our whole lebab, nefesh, and mehod;
Our whole center, life-essence, and capacity;
All our heart, and our soul, and our might;

Not to mention a liberal dosing of God's grace,
to break through the walls of isolation and self-centeredness that surround us:
that we have built up brick by brick in the mistaken belief that they keep us safe.
These few words carry in them a tremendous power –
the power to remind us
of the awesome responsibility of being a Christian in an often hostile world.
To meet evil with good. To meet hatred with love.
To meet poverty with generosity. To meet doubt with courage.
To meet fear with faith. To shine a light into the darkness.
To make a difference in the world in which we live.
Love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your might.
And
love your neighbor as yourself.
On these two commandments hang the hopes of the world.
Amen.