

The idea of Nancy's again sitting down with the kids this morning was raised just a few days ago, after I had determined the idea and title of my remarks today. I appreciate her doing so — sort of. I really enjoy talking with the kids, but the truth is I generally find it easier to come up with one of my two hour sermons than to come up with three to five minutes with the kids. When I tried to discuss the ethic in Fyodor Dostoyevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* with them, it was a complete flop.

This past week, I happened to sit in on the women's Bible study, which Nancy led, and while intending no criticism whatsoever, I want to make the way she closed out the study sort of a foil for what I have to say this morning.

Nancy handed everyone a little "crib sheet" with some biblical verses to look up if one had need of trusting in God; if one needs reminding to trust in God, then look up one of the verses.

Fine, but in the larger picture of living our lives with others, we repeatedly encounter situations when and where we may not have access to a crib sheet, or where a specific answer we need might not appear on a crib sheet, so we need to have some answers *lodged* in our brains, or maybe . . .

Let me back up for a moment, and look at a perhaps non-obvious part of Jesus' answer to the scribe (in this case I have no defensiveness about calling him a "lawyer" because, surprisingly, I think this lawyer comes across fairly well, even if he had thought he was putting Jesus on the defensive rather than asking an honest question). The lawyer asks, "What is the greatest *commandment*?" What do we think he was asking? I suspect his intention was, "Which of the Ten Commandments is most important?"

OK, and Jesus answers, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength." Which of the Ten Commandments is that? Well, it isn't! It is part of what we know as the *Shema* in the Book of Deuteronomy. But Jesus also says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Which of the Ten Commandments is that? Again, it is not; it is a verse in Leviticus, certainly among the more boring reads of any book in the Bible.

Is there some meaning in this answer's *not* being from the Ten Commandments, or am I reading too much into the question? I am not positive, but I think I am not, so please bear with me.

As I know you know, the story of the Ten Commandments is that God wrote, God *inscribed* them on stone tablets, which Moses somehow carried down the mountain and the people could read, though I suspect that since there was no written Hebrew language at the time of Moses, and since it is completely unlikely that the ex-slave Israelites would have been able to read hieroglyphics, the story may be *symbolic* and not meant to be as literally historic as we take it. Yet at least figuratively, God wrote, God *inscribed*, on stone tablets a series of ten — or eleven if we follow the comparison of the two biblical listings of these commandments — a series of ten specific commandments, all but two of which are couched in the negative, not a very complete guide for living, but highly pleasing to we strict Calvinists, who, as I said two

weeks ago quoting the late H.L. Mencken, are united by the concern that someone, somewhere, might be having a good time.

Ten Commandments, couched in the negative, . . . and not providing an immediate answer to the question asked Jesus, not providing the “crib sheet” for his answer, these commandments inscribed on stone.

Not that the Ten Commandments are not valuable or should be ignored, not by any means, but they do not of themselves give us guidance on how we should live our lives in a *positive* or *directional* sense, which Jesus’ answer does! And Paul, though not in today’s reading which I chose for a purpose that may already be apparent, Paul says in Romans that the *entire* (Jewish) Law of which the Ten Commandments is a part is summed up by, “Love your neighbor as yourself!”

I say “Love God and Love Your Neighbor” so often that none of you need a crib sheet to remember it, and I hope that in parallel with what was said by the prophet Jeremiah from whom Betsy read, that “Love God and Love Your Neighbor” is written not merely in our memories, but *inscribed* on our hearts, “Love God and Love you neighbor” is all our crib sheet for life need contain.

But, following what is on our hearts’ crib sheet is not so easy.

As this morning’s Prayer of Confession, I had us use Psalm 51, which is always read during Lent, usually to begin Lent, and which I believe contains *a massive theological error!* (Actually, I believe it contains two such theological errors, but I excised the second from what we read.) That is right, I believe this psalm contains *a massive theological error!* While some of you are preparing the hot tar and feathers, let me explain why: it is the line, *Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight,*

No, no, a thousand times no! Most of our sins are from *failure to love our neighbor*; in fact, virtually all violations of the Ten Commandments save the first two actually deal with sinning against our neighbor, against another human being. *Failure to love our neighbor* often means we have sinned not just against God, but against our neighbor as well, both through acts of commission, and through omission, through not acting to help.

The Apostle Paul, especially in the Book of Romans which I am excitedly revisiting as I veer off on a tangent while preparing the Tuesday morning Bible Study, the Apostle Paul, consistent with the statement I quoted about all of the Law’s being summed up by “Love your neighbor,” expresses the idea that I reflexively express to you: God’s purpose in giving the Law, in blessing the Jews with Torah, was that the people of God might live together in justice and peace and joy — not “happiness,” “joy.” When we sin, almost invariably, we sin against the justice or peace or joy of another or of the community. That is also a sin against God, to be sure, but the psalmist in Psalm 51 lets himself off too easily; we sin against others, as well.

But knowing when we sin does not require a checklist; knowing what to do right does not require a checklist nor a crib sheet beyond what I hope God through Jesus has inscribed not on, or not merely on, stone, but inscribed on our hearts: Love God; Love your neighbor.

The Women's Bible Study class is doing a study on Luke, and the item with which I assume, from the book they are using to study Luke, the item with which I assume they will open their next class has a lawyer (of course; the gospel writers have it in for lawyers) ask Jesus the question, "And who is my neighbor?" which is his pretext for the incredibly rich and almost transparently clear parable of "The Good Samaritan." But that is not what I am going to discuss.

Instead, I want to go to the title in your bulletins which was my attempt to use our Lenten theme of "Survivor — Desert Edition" with what is hardly a desert but another climatological location, the Steppes of Russia (and Ukraine), and that was only because I want to appeal to the idea stated by a great Russian Orthodox Christian — one with a huge gambling problem, he did not claim to be perfect — that fellow I mentioned at the outset, Dostoyevski. I am not going to give the plot of any of his books, Jim Burns has cured me of summarizing Russian novels, but one of Dostoyevski's characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* presents Dostoyevski's theology when he says that he is "responsible for everyone, for everything," meaning, "all that I do affects another, and every other person is a child of God."

"All that I do affects another, and every other person is a child of God." Every other person is a child of God, and hence a "neighbor" for whom we must remember what is inscribed — or what we want to have inscribed — on our hearts, "Love God and Love your neighbor."

The reason Jesus sees these two "commandments" as being alike is because if we really claim to love God, then we must love the children of God as well.

Which means whenever we encounter *anyone*, let us not look at a list to see how to regard them, whether they are Christian or Muslim or agnostic, citizen or alien, gay or straight, poor or poorer, let the knowledge of how we are to regard them be inscribed even deeper into our hearts than were those Ten Commandments inscribed in stone, so that knowing what is inscribed, we treat *all* others as fellow children of God; we show them acts of love such as kindness, justice, charity, for they are our neighbors.

*Treat all others as fellow children of God; all.* Several weeks ago I told you that I had received a text from my older son that my last living hero, Minnie Minoso, had died. I have often shared that, though he died when I was less than two, the German pastor and theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *posthumously* became a hero, and in an excerpt from his writing that I read as part of my Lenten meditations, he said this, which I think is relevant:

Our hearts always like to stay among friends, among those who are upright and honorable. But Jesus Christ was in the midst of enemies, and that's precisely where he wanted to be. And that's where we should be, too. This distinguishes us from all other sects and religions, where the pious want to stay among themselves. Christ, however, wants us to be in the midst of our enemies, as he was. In the midst of his enemies he died the death of God's love and prayed: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." . . . Therefore, do not withdraw; do not separate yourselves, but think good things about everyone. Live peaceably with all . . . our hearts should always be full of peace. . . It *is* your responsibility to speak that word [the word of God] for peace, to speak for the peace of human beings with God, in the midst of a human world that is torn apart and alienated. Jesus made peace with us while we were enemies. Let us bear witness to this peace before everyone.

Bonhoeffer was not naive; he was speaking about life under the Nazis, truly *enemies*, and understood moral complexity as his death ultimately was from his arrest for involvement in an unsuccessful plot to kill Hitler, yet, well, enemies are children of God as well as we; they, too, are neighbors for whom Jesus may feel anguish, not hatred.

Love God and love your neighbors. Short, simple, stated over and over again so that it should not require being written down, but should be *inscribed* on every Christian heart; familiar, but not trite, in fact, amazingly profound. If "love God and love your neighbors" were followed, it could put lawyers out of business.

What a shame.

Amen