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SUNDAY: Ordinary 32

SERMON: Commanding Love

Text(s): Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34

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You've probably read or heard the news this past week about the efforts of the state police to get people to slow down on the Maine Turnpike, particularly where construction is in progress. They're apparently putting policemen in construction workers' clothing, with hard hats and tripods which look like surveying equipment, but in reality are radar guns. A lot of people are upset at this sneaky way of enforcing the speed limits. I won't ask for a show of hands this morning to find out if any of us have been caught by this creative law enforcement technique.

We have a very ambivalent attitude toward rules, don't we. On the one hand, we recognize that some kind of structure is necessary if life is to be tolerable. Few of us are really comfortable with chaos. That's probably why the theme of "law and order" is such a powerful political tool in the hands of those running for public office, and why the TV show of that same name is such a hit. Everybody wants law and order; nobody wants anarchy and chaos, except terrorists and revolutionaries, for whom chaos and anarchy are tools to accomplish their political goals.

Yet at the same time as we want rules to provide structure and order for our lives, we also chafe under them and feel constrained by them, especially on the interstate or turnpike when there's not much traffic and we're in a hurry to get somewhere. This week, there was also an article in the *New York Times* that talked of the growing concern of the IRS at the incremental, but steady increase of those who think it's all right to cheat a little on their income taxes. Americans, the article said, have historically held that honest payment of duly legislated taxes was a civic virtue. But the picture is changing. More and more, we seem willing to break that longstanding cultural rule. Now if this were

France, this would not be news, since there, government operates on the assumption that the citizenry will cheat on its taxes religiously, and the citizenry operates on the assumption that the government will gouge as much tax money out of them as possible by honest or dishonest methods. And both are correct. Tax assessing and tax paying in France is a competitive national sport.

Our ambivalence toward following rules may be due to the fact that we recognize that rules have a tendency to become ends in themselves. Too often, we end up living by the rules for the sake of the rules

This tendency provides the setting for our gospel lesson today. By Jesus' day, the Law of Moses, enshrined in the Ten Commandments, had evolved into an incredibly complex religious and legal system that kept the religious lawyers occupied full time simply interpreting the meaning of the commandments. Every commandment gave birth to a whole host of other regulations and laws which supposedly protected one from inadvertently violating the commandment itself. The rabbis called this process "building a fence around the Torah." Laws multiplied in order to protect other laws. In fact, by the time of Jesus, the single commandment, "*Remember the sabbath to keep it holy,*" had multiplied into more than six hundred separate commands, all designed to protect the law of the sabbath from violation, including such esoteric regulations as to whether or not wearing false teeth on the sabbath was permissible. Answer: wooden or stone teeth were OK because that was for utility; gold or silver teeth were not OK because they were for vanity. The rules had become ends in themselves.

This is the context for the religious lawyer's question to Jesus, "*Which commandment is the greatest in the law?*" Mark has placed this incident in a whole series of incidents showing us the attempts by the religious authorities to trap Jesus into making some incriminating statements against the religious laws. Presumably, if they can get him to appear as a person who holds the law in contempt, he will lose much of his public appeal. Just prior to

this incident, we have seen him being questioned about such things as the legal implications of divorce, the ritual baptism practiced by John the Baptist, the legality of paying taxes to Caesar, the legal implications of the doctrine of the resurrection for a wife who had had several husbands—all extremely controversial subjects which they hoped would cause Jesus to “shoot himself in the foot.”

Yet one of these canon lawyers is impressed with Jesus’ deft handling of his opponents, and so he poses this question about which is the greatest commandment of all? This was not a frivolous question. It was a question that had been repeatedly asked and addressed by the greatest rabbis. It was a question that arose whenever the rules threatened to become ends in themselves, rather than a means to an end. And Jesus’ answer is not even original with him. The great Pharasaic rabbi Hillel who lived 50 or 60 years before Jesus, when challenged by one of his students to recite the whole Torah while standing on one foot, replied, “To love God with all one’s heart and to love one’s neighbor is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary.”

So when Jesus replies, like Hillel, by appealing to the central theological and religious confession of Israel from the Book of Deuteronomy, “*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself,*” he is appealing not to one of the rules and singling it out as the greatest or most important; he is summarizing the whole of the the Ten Commandments, the first four of which concern human relationships and obligations toward God, and the last six concern relationships with one’s neighbor. Jesus’ understanding, like that of the rabbis before him, saw these two as inextricably linked; one’s relationship to God cannot be separated from one’s relationship to the neighbor. To say one is to say the other as well.

St. John, in his first epistle, states this equation even more forcefully: “*The one who says he loves God, but does not love his brother or sister is a liar. If one does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen, he cannot love God whom he has not seen.*”

Now the question arises, at least for me: how can love be commanded? We don’t normally think about love in these terms, do we? I certainly don’t think that the lovers we saw all over Paris sitting on the park benches or standing in the middle of the Champs Elysees locked in passionate embraces were doing that because they had been commanded to love their sweethearts.

Jesus’ statement about the greatest commandment, however, only shows us that our ideas of love are seriously impoverished when we limit love to an emotion. We don’t have to be commanded to love our sweethearts, or our children or even usually our parents or siblings. Those loves all are natural expressions that grow out of our feelings of sexual passion, companionship, friendship or parent-child bonding, though we’re all aware that love within families isn’t always a natural occurrence and is often distorted. Then how can love be commanded—love for God and love for our neighbor, which, Jesus says, amounts to the same thing?

Because the love of which Jesus speaks is not a feeling at all; it is concrete behavior that is rooted in our wills, in our decisions. To love our neighbor as ourselves is to act lovingly toward our neighbor, whether we feel like it or not. To love God with all one’s being is to behave toward God with covenant loyalty in response to God’s covenant loyalty to us. It’s a matter of commitment, of decision, of concrete action and behavior. Feeling may or may not enter into it, though if we act in covenant loyalty toward God by concretely loving our neighbor, we will discover that feelings follow our actions. It’s hard to dislike someone to whom you are acting lovingly. It is the action, however, which is the

love of which Jesus speaks.

The famous psychiatrist Carl Jung once had a patient who was deeply depressed. (I'll defer to our resident Jungian expert Bill Geoghegan as to whether this story is apocryphal or not; but even if it is, it's a good story.) After a number of sessions of therapy, Jung perceived that the depression was the result of the patient's intense preoccupation with self, and particularly her sense that the world wasn't treating her fairly. He told her that he could help her, and that the cure for her depression lay in learning how to love others. He said, "Every morning for the next month, whether you feel like it or not, I want you to leave your house, go to the section of your city where there are people who are worse off than you are and do something concrete to help someone who is in need." Within two weeks, the woman's depression had lifted. She was learning obedience to the command to love her neighbor as herself, and in that obedience, she was discovering meaning and fulfillment in her own life. Or, to put it another way, she was discovering God.

Is this love for our neighbor limited to our personal relationships, however? Is it only for the private sphere of personal ethics or interpersonal dynamics that the command to love God and love our neighbors applies? There are many who say it *is* limited to the realm of personal or private ethics.

Charles Krauthammer, in a widely publicized article in the *New Republic* in March of 1999, argued against altruism, which is another name for the kind of love which Jesus is speaking of, as a basis for public policy. "In private conduct, altruism is the ideal; for a nation, however, it can mean ruin. Nations are not individuals. They live in a state of nature with no higher authority to protect them. If they do not protect themselves, they die. Ignoring one's interests, reacting in fits of altruism, is an invitation to a ruinous squandering of blood and treasure. . . Foreign policy is not social work."

Whether or not you agree with Krauthammer's political positions, what struck me as a fundamental flaw in his argument was his treatment of altruism as a sentiment, an emotion which we (or a government) have occasional fits of. One may have altruistic feelings or not, but altruism is primarily a behavior, not a feeling. C. S. Lewis once said that liking or disliking someone is no more a sin than indigestion. Liking or disliking, which is the basis far too often for the ways we act toward others, is really a matter of temperament, of personality, of circumstances and history. To act altruistically is to do the thing that is in the other party's best interest, even if it is at some cost to our own convenience or personal feelings and preferences. In other words, it is action that is done with an eye to the other's good, whether that other be an individual or a nation. It is "loving our neighbors as ourselves."

And that, I submit— that will to loving action,— is precisely what is lacking in our world, whether it is in our interpersonal relationships with other individuals, or in the relationships between nations. This lack is why so many marriages fail, why so many friendships are broken by betrayal, why relationships within families are sometimes abusive or destructive. And further, it is why all political or ideological, or economic programs designed to produce utopia have failed, and are doomed ultimately to fail. Even those ideologies which appear to be altruistic, such as socialism, where the ideal is the just distribution of the world's resources, cannot ultimately succeed as long as they depend upon the social and political and economic structures being operated by individuals whose central loyalties, whose central motivations are fundamentally selfish rather than loving.

I don't know any way to escape being sucked into that selfishness except to become part of a community of people who are learning to live by different fundamental loyalties and therefore, are modeling a different social behavior. That is

what the church is about, friends. We are a group of people, who come together week after week to confess that we are not the center of the universe. We confess that neither money nor nation nor political party nor a particular social or economic philosophy nor any other worldly power or system can claim our ultimate loyalty. We confess, along with ancient Israel, that “*the Lord our God, is God alone.*” We confess that we are a people who have been greatly loved and blessed by this God without doing anything to deserve that love and in many cases doing things that should have caused God to recoil from us in despair. “*God proves his love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,*” says St. Paul, and he goes on, “*Owe no one anything except to love one another, for the one who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.*” God’s love for us does not depend on God having a sudden fit of altruism. While we were still sinners, God loved us by making covenant with us and being faithful to his commitments, even at enormous cost, a cost that is clearly seen in an old rugged cross erected on the garbage dump outside Jerusalem. And that covenant loyalty and faithfulness to his commitment becomes the basis for our own ability to reach out in service and self-giving to our neighbors.

In community, we learn to love as God loves. As we encourage one another and pray for one another and love one another, we also demonstrate to the world around us that it is possible to live, not competitively and selfishly, but lovingly. And in that love lies both our own salvation and the world’s hope.