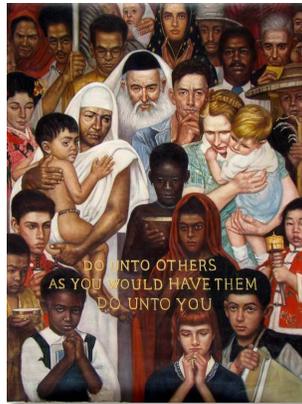


“Love Unmasked”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 14



The Golden Rule
Norman Rockwell

Readings

The commandments . . . are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

~ Romans 13:9-10 from the *New Revised Standard Version*

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense, but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy, but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.

~ James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*

In our tradition we often hear: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All four Gospels quote Jesus as having said this, and often in response to the question, “Which commandment is the greatest?” The most important command, he taught, was to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Another way to say it is to always treat others the way that you would like to be treated. This concept that we fondly call the “Golden Rule” is the Christian expression of a thread that runs through virtually every major world religious tradition. So, theoretically speaking, if a hundred percent of the people practiced this rule a hundred percent of the time, we would need few other laws and regulations, if any. If you’re caring for others as you care for yourself, you’re not going to cheat, lie, steal, or murder. There is a whole raft of things that love just doesn’t do by its very nature. And this is why the New Testament letter to the Romans says that all the commandments are summed up in this one sentence, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love fulfills the entire purpose and intent of the law.

It seems so very simple, doesn't it? All the laws and the rules and the regulations are simply the schoolmasters to help us until we reach a maturity level called *love*. Once we learn to love, we graduate to a higher form of human existence, and elementary expressions of right and wrong become second nature. This is one good reason why we in the church have aspired to see our primary work in the world as becoming a "school of love." We long to be a sort of laboratory where we get together and practice love in such a way that we ultimately send graduates into the world to become models of what love is and does. Some religious organizations take the easier route of creating rules and regulations to control human behavior when, really, there is a "more excellent way" to do it, in the words of 1 Corinthians 13.

A number of years ago I attended a conference that was held in a church building, and after my first day there, I remarked to Tripp that I could scarcely find a door, a cupboard, a window latch or even a light switch that didn't have a laminated regulation posted beside it. We all know how it goes. Someone left the lights on. Someone found the lights had been left on. A sign was made that said, "Please turn off the lights." Then life proceeded nicely until someone forgot to lock the door. Someone found the door unlocked, and another sign was made that said, "Don't forget to lock the door." And this continued until there were literally hundreds of signs and tags instructing everyone what to do about everything. This is how rule books come to exist. This is how legislatures make laws. This is how Bibles are written. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not advocating for a lawless culture or society, but as Jesus taught, there is a better, more efficient way of controlling human behavior: Love your neighbor as yourself. But as we all know, we live in the world that is, and not a theoretical one where everyone does this all the time. There are modes of human expression that are not loving at all. There are those who are more concerned with power than anything else, so just as in the days of the Hebrew prophets, we need strong voices to point out to us what happens when love becomes cheapened and sentimentalized to the point that it becomes meaningless.

Nearly six decades ago, one of the more passionate and prophetic voices of the American civil rights movement, author James Baldwin, wrote a biting essay that became a book called *The Fire Next Time*. In it he uses the word "love" not in the "infantile American sense," but in the "tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth." "Love," he says, "takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know that we cannot live within." There are the sensible masks that we wear to the grocery store to discourage the spread of COVID 19, the physical barriers that are less about protecting ourselves and more about protecting others. Such masks are not political expressions of fear, but demonstrations of love for neighbor. They say "I love you enough to do what I can to protect you." When James Baldwin spoke of masks in 1963, they were metaphors of white supremacy and racism. Masks were the province of the Ku Klux Klan and others who feared loss of perceived superiority or control. When you love your neighbor as you love yourself, you can dare to drop those kinds of masks, to know fully and to be fully known. I am reminded of how Jesus was pressed for further clarification with the question, "And who is my neighbor?" His answer was in the form of a story with racial and ethnic overtones. It was the story of the despised Samaritan who took pity on the one who was beaten and left for dead, while the self-righteousness of the religious elite led them to walk

right past the victim without helping. It's exceedingly clear when we examine this core belief and practice of the one we call Jesus of Nazareth, that love moves us beyond any conversation about race, class, or ethnicity, and brings us into the realm of justice, equality, and love for all sentient beings everywhere.

The Christ-consciousness that we espouse has nothing at all to do with brand name religiosity. It bears no relationship to the subjugation of anyone based on issues of race, ethnicity, age, level of abilities, gender identity, or expression or any human condition. The school of love that we long to be is open to anyone who wants to practice living in the world as we imagine it to be, the world that needs one rule and one rule alone: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Our capacities of love are ever evolving, and our current challenges are providing countless opportunities to deepen them as love of neighbor plays out daily on the sidewalk, in the grocery aisle, or in interactions with our actual neighbors. We are in new territory, learning to love in ways that a year ago we might never have conceived of. Suddenly, it seems, love is all there is.

