

After the last few weeks when we have heard parables of violence and exclusion, it's something of a relief to get to the two great commandments, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' And 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' For most of us this is the center of Jesus' teaching.

But I wonder whether that is right. Jesus himself says, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." He doesn't say, "On these two commandments hang all of my life and teaching."

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that in some way the two great commandments have been superseded and we can forget them. Not at all. In fact, we need them as much as ever. I don't think any of us can claim that we manage to follow them but they continue to be our goal, our intention and our hope.

And they are both equally important. Sometimes people think that loving others is all that is needed and forget the first commandment – to be in loving relationship with the divine. Sometimes we do the opposite and get so caught up in ideas of God that we ignore the needs of our neighbors. And sometimes we get into the distortion of thinking that loving one's neighbor as oneself really means taking care of number 1, because we can't love others until we love ourselves, right?

I don't think that's true. Love grows, love expands. The more we love, the more love there is. But a mature love allows the other person to be who they are as well as allowing oneself to be who one is. Loving one's neighbor in a self-giving way includes self-care, because unless we care for ourselves our acts of love become acts of martyrdom. I think this is where humility comes in. Humility allows us to see ourselves clearly – not too exalted and not too insignificant. When we can see ourselves clearly then we can also see others more clearly. We can see when self-care tips into ego-driven self-satisfaction or selfishness.

The desert fathers and mothers said “Your life and your death is with your neighbor.” Although they chose to live in isolated cells, or in small groups, they knew that it is in our relationship with our neighbor that we live out our true spirituality. That’s not easy, because often we don’t know how to live in harmony, or there are conflicting needs between our different neighbors, or between ourselves and our neighbors.

Here at St Benedict’s we have a commitment to help those who are homeless or living on the edge. That commitment is not shared by our physical neighbors. When we have guests in our parking lot it makes them feel afraid or angry. They are as much our neighbors as the people in need and so we get to discern God’s path which embraces them both. Our challenge is to find a way to love both our physical neighbors and our metaphorical neighbors.

But I digress, I started by saying that I don’t think love God and love your neighbor is Jesus’ core message. Certainly it builds on it, but Jesus goes further. When he started his ministry he preached, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” And he quoted from Isaiah “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18,19)

I think Jesus’ core message is one of transformation; transformation of individuals and transformation of society. And in that transformation comes a new understanding and a new practice of love, but the transformation is vital. Without it, our love of God and love of neighbor continues to be ego-driven. Without it, there is nothing new in our way of being, we just conform to the standards and expectations of the world. We love our families and those who are close to us; we give to charities and we read on-line meditations and feel good.

But it's not about feeling good. Jesus calls for a radical realignment. He says we must be born again of water and the spirit; he says we must forgive our brother not just once or twice but seventy times seven; he says that you can't put new wine in old wineskins – the very institutions and structures of society have to change.

We are called to be the Body of Christ, we are called to live as if the reign of God is really here, really now, really new. We are the ones who are to be transformed and to bring transformation. Yes this is loving God and our neighbor but it's so much more.

Paul says we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds so that we may discern the good, pleasing and perfect will of God (Rom 2:12). The will of God is that all of creation be redeemed and brought into perfection in and through the Christ. None of the cosmos exists outside of God, all of creation is in relationship with God. Yet, (it's Paul speaking again) "The creation waits in eager expectation for the revelation of the children of God. For" God's intention is... "that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." (Rom 8: 19,22)

This is a step further than loving God and neighbor, demanding as that may be. Now we're into the realms of future-speak, of apparent science fiction.

God's intention is for us to be transformed in such a way that we are set free, and so is the whole of creation! God's intention is for a total miracle that changes everything. And we get to be involved in making that happen. How? By the renewal of our minds.

And that is the work of the Holy Spirit, with our cooperation. It's not magic, but it is powerful. God's grace works with our intention to help us to forgive, to help us see the world with God's eyes of unconditional love, so that we too may "preach good news to the poor.... proclaim deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, release the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Because as the

beloved children of God, as those who have been baptized into the reign of God, that is our inheritance, that is our truth.

So yes it's all about love. But it's not about creaturely love, it's about divine love. Divine love pouring into us, and into our world.

I will close with an adaptation of one of my favorite stories from the desert fathers and mothers. Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, insofar as I can, I say my prayers, I keep my little fast, and I pray and meditate and practice contemplative silence, and insofar as I can I purify myself of distracting thoughts. I love God and I love my neighbor. Now what more shall I do?"

The elder stood up and stretched his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, "Why not become completely fire?"