

On a podcast I listened to this week, a prominent British Christian nationalist pastor was interviewed. This pastor holds staunch anti-immigration views, believing it's absolutely necessary to oppose immigration into Britain, particularly immigration of Muslims, to preserve Britain's 'historically Christian identity.'

The podcast interviewer asked this pastor about his Christian faith, how he reconciles his message (which many see as aggressive and hate-filled) with the commandment that Christians should love their neighbors as themselves. In response, the pastor said, "a lot of people bring that up."

Then he asks the interviewer whether he loves his next-door neighbor enough to give them a key to his house. He says, do you love them enough to give them a key to your house and to let them come into your house while you're sleeping? Do you love them enough that your neighbor can open your fridge and eat your food? Do they get free reign in your house because you love them? 100% of the time, he says, the answer will be "no" from every human being.

He's probably not wrong.

I was a bit disappointed when the interviewer had no response to the analogy the pastor had chosen to make his point, and instead, just moved on. But I wasn't surprised. Because actually breaking down Jesus' commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself," what it actually means, is going to take a little bit more than a few well put together sentences.

Jesus says, in today's Gospel reading, that all the Law and the Prophets hang on this commandment, on this, and the greatest and first commandment: to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

All the Law and the Prophets.

If there were a quick and easy way to describe what it is to love our neighbor, I think the Bible would be a heck of a lot shorter than it is.

What the pastor in the podcast didn't make reference to is that loving our neighbor is joined, by Jesus, to our loving God. Jesus presents these two commandments together, with the commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind being the greatest and the first.

Crucial for life, inseparable from life are love and God, and neither are easy to understand in their fullness, yet the commandment calls us to a whole life of being attentive to both. We may not be able to define either succinctly, but Jesus tells us we must, nevertheless, trust that both matter more than anything else, in this life and beyond.

It's a bit tragic that the English language has only one word for love, because we live in a culture where 'Romantic love' is a kind of apex of the love experience. But this love is much more than that, as I'm sure most of you know only too well from your own lives.

Love is the ability to fully acknowledge another in a way that's not related to what the other can offer or provide, or dependent on how the other makes us feel. Love is not transactional.

Love acknowledges the inherent worth of the other, totally independent of whether our love is reciprocated.

Love has us act, it's not just a feeling, it's a force that compels us to respond, it becomes real in the world in the ways we treat another, through our attentiveness and care, our capacity for patience and honesty, our desire for justice, and our ability to do difficult things like telling the truth, even when it might be risky or disruptive.

Love does not aim to harm.

Perhaps most importantly, love affects us. Love has us be open and receptive to another in way that will change us.

This way of understanding love helps with Jesus' other commandment to love our enemies. When we understand love as an orientation to life, a way of being, we can see that love does not mean we have to have affection for another, it doesn't mean we have to agree with another, or even be in relationship with another.

Understanding love as a state of our being, that it's not an emotional thing, a feeling that's either present or absent, understanding love as the character of life lived means love cannot be assumed or associated automatically with any particular identity.

All kinds of folks call themselves Christians, and that's their choice. But it doesn't mean they love in the way Jesus calls them to love. It doesn't mean we love in the way Jesus calls us to love.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that the love of God is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.¹ This is our capacity for love, that we, as humans, as baptized Christians, have a way to know love, to live by it, if we choose.

¹ Romans 5:5

It doesn't mean we're all done, we're now loving, nor does the identity of 'Christian' mean that.

Love will only ever be the result of our choice to participate in the life of God; as Christians, this is discipleship. And being a disciple of Jesus takes discipline and attentiveness, and spiritual effort to stay engaged and remain oriented, especially when we're challenged, especially when the world around us is ugly, shows its darkness, when folks around us behave in ways that make them hard to love.

Jesus says that all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments, the Law and the Prophets depend on them.

The Law and the Prophets, for Jesus, and for those he was speaking to, are what expressed the fundamental purpose of everything that God had taught ancient Israel about how to live.

The Law (the first five books of the Bible) told them who they were, about God's covenant with them, it shaped their worship lives, their relationships and communal responsibilities, and their understanding of justice.

The Prophets, also part of their Scripture and ours, called the people who had fallen away, chosen to live disregarding the Law, the Prophets called them back into covenant with God. The Prophets challenged idolatry, the placing of other concerns and things at the center of life. The Prophets condemned systemic injustices and lack of care of the vulnerable, and the Prophets call out the meaninglessness of worship and prayer without lived faithfulness to God.

It all depends on relationship and lives lived, the quality and the lived reality of our relationship with God and our neighbor, and the way of life we choose and commit to.

We absolutely have the capacity to love God and love and our neighbor, but we have to learn how to do it.

And that's what this is for, that's what this church is for. Here's where we learn, where we develop our capacity to love, through daily prayer, worship, and the sacrament, by engaging with and inwardly digesting holy Scripture, and by engaging with and committing to a life lived together, in relationship, with God and with one another.

The church, gathering around the truth of Christ, to be Christ's living body in the world, can give us all we need to participate in this life of love, all we need to be disciples of the one who came that we might have life, and so love, in abundance.

Here is where we can learn, learn how to receive the effect of God's love into our lives, so that we will love God with all our heart, soul and mind and our neighbor as ourselves in response.

It's all here, we've inherited all we need.

Jesus has given us the way, and our ancestors in the faith developed practices and disciplines that, if we participate - if we commit to a life of learning and attentive, intentional living - will be transformational.

That's what's on offer, here, for us, if we want it.