

I learned in my Old Testament class at seminary that the Judaism of Jesus' day had 613 laws to be known and obeyed. The purpose of these laws is to tell us what we have to do to be in right-relationship with God. Some 248 of these laws are things that people should DO, such as "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy." The remaining 365 laws are things that we shouldn't do, such as "Don't kill," and "Don't covet." And if all of those laws weren't enough, there were many different interpretations of each law. Just knowing all the laws and the interpretations was a full-time job for the Pharisees, a group of religious leader—temple lawyers!—in the Judaism of Jesus' day.

The Pharisees were truly righteous folks. Many of them scrupulously kept ALL of God's laws. According to the gospels the Pharisees were serious about keeping all the laws. They fasted twice a week and gave tithes—a minimum of ten percent—of all that they possessed to God. Would that we had a few more Pharisees in our parish.

We hear in today's gospel lesson that the Pharisees asked Jesus a trick question— "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" The answer in Jesus' day would not have been as obvious as it is to us today. Jesus did not have the benefit that we have, of Jesus' summary of all God's laws, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart," and "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Now I know what you might be thinking. I suspect that you are thinking, "Of course Jesus could find the unifying principles among all these laws. Jesus was God, the maker and knower of all things. Of course Jesus could do this." If that's what you are thinking, you're right! But, I assert, it doesn't take a divinity to find a unifying principle among the laws of God; what it takes is a master practitioner, someone who lives the laws, and lives them with love.

There's an often-told story you may have heard about some blind men trying to describe an elephant. They each focus on the parts that they can feel, describing the trunk and legs and so on, missing the "big picture" of the whole elephant. In today's gospel lesson we get a graphic illustration of Jesus' ability to see into the heart of things, to find the big picture, to recognize the elephant, so to speak. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart," and "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Make no mistake about the situation described in today's Gospel lesson; Jesus' summary of the law aptly names the elephant in the room: "**Do we love God?**" If so, how do we show that we love God? "**Do**

we love our neighbor?” If so, how do we live loving our neighbor? **“Do we even love ourselves?”** If so, how do we share our love for ourselves with others?

I love my neighbors. They are just like me and they love me back.

Jesus’ teaching challenges this kind of thinking, of course. I am sure that you all have begun critiquing the concept, “My neighbors are those who are just like me, and those who love me back.” Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke’s gospel graphically tells us who our neighbor is: **Our neighbor is whoever God puts in our lives.**

Sometimes the people whom God puts into our lives aren’t a bit like us. This gives us the opportunity to rejoice in the abundant diversity of God’s creation, and to stretch ourselves as we learn unconditional love. Young and old. Male and female. Rich and poor. Highly educated in school and highly educated by life alone. Black and White. Oriental and Caucasian. Gay and straight. Employed and unemployed. Latino and Anglo. Christian and Jewish and Muslim and Buddhist and Hindu and... Other. Denominational and non-denominational. Those at one end of these dualities, and all in between. All beloved Children of God.

Who has God put into your life to love?

Sometimes the people whom God puts into our personal lives and who challenge us the most are members of our own family. They are the ones who sometimes ask the most of us, and who teach us how to be in relationship without writing anyone off. **Who in your family challenges you the most, and how do you show your love for them?**

Sometimes the people whom God puts into our lives live far away and come to us by proxy. There is a great example of that right here in our parish. We are involved in a mission in Tanzania, thanks to the call that God has given to Henry and Priscilla Ziegler to serve in a medical ministry there. **Who has someone in your life called you to consider your neighbor?**

Sometimes the people whom God puts into the presence of our church community live very near us and knock at our door, so to speak. There is a great example of that right here. We are involved in a ministry that prepares and serves meals each month at a local shelter, and God has given us the Yi and Pugh families to teach us to stretch our concept of neighbor in that direction. Each winter we stretch ourselves even more when we open our church building as a shelter for a week. Then we give of ourselves individually and

corporately, and in the process discover that the people in need whom we serve are very much like us.

Which of your neighbors have you fed with your love?

I see that at Holy Cross we are trying (and often succeeding) at loving our neighbor as ourselves. That is the way of faithfulness, the doing of the Great Commandment. However, being a member of a church that has many Great Commandment ministries is only a start. Funding such ministries is the next step, but the step that really counts is becoming personally involved in living a life of love.

“If we love God, we will love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. If we love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves, we will love God.” If this sounds like circular reasoning, it is. No matter where we break into this circle of love, one step leads to another and back again. Love is all connected, of a single piece. Love is of God and love *is* God.

Sometimes I think that we humans devise religious laws to disguise what we know to be true in our hearts: Having a relationship with God is not so much about what we believe, but how we act.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.”