

The rest is commentary

Hillel was a great holy man of Israel, a religious leader in Jerusalem who died when Jesus was about 10 years old. He had a contemporary named Shemai, who was considered his religious rival. This tale is told of them in the Talmud.

A gentile, perhaps intending to mock or trick the holy men of Israel, came to Shemai and asked the religious leader to teach him the Torah while the gentile stood on one foot. Shemai chastised him and told him to go away and not to waste his time; no one could learn the Torah in just a few minutes, when people spent a lifetime studying it. This gives you an idea of what Shemai was like.

Then the gentile went to Hillel with the same request. Hillel said to him in reply: "That which is hateful to you, do not do unto your fellow. That is the whole [Torah](#); the rest is commentary. Go and learn." This gives you an idea of what Hillel was like.

Today Jesus is in a similar conflict with opponents hoping to trap him, although here it is with his own religious leaders. This shouldn't surprise us at this point. This discussion has been going on for several Sundays now. They too ask a question about the Torah and its teaching – what is the greatest commandment in the law? And they too find out what Jesus is like as a result.

Jesus' answer comes straight from the Torah. The first part comes from the book of Deuteronomy (chapter 6 v 4) and a variation of the second part can be found in Leviticus chapter 19 v 18, which we heard in today's first reading.

Jesus words his take on the greatest commandment in this way:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Jesus for the win.

But there is another subtle debate that is going on here, a test of wills and a conflict over what sort of Messiah God will send to save Israel. Both Jesus and his opponents would agree that Israel needs saving. Though they might disagree about what she needs saving from.

Many in Israel hoped for a king like David who would save them from Rome and make them a great nation again.

But Jesus saw the enemy of Israel as the things that separated his people, and all of humanity, from the love of God – sin and death were the big culprits. And he understood that he had an essential role, a Messianic role, to play in their defeat.

N.T. Wright, who I have been quoting a lot as we've studied Matthew's Gospel these many Sundays, puts it this way:

"What Jesus says here about loving God, and loving one another, only makes sense when we set it within Matthew's larger gospel picture, of Jesus dying for the sins of the world, and rising again with the message of new life. That's when these commandments begin to come into their own: when they are

seen not as orders to be obeyed in our own strength, but as invitations and promises to a new way of life in which, bit by bit, hatred and pride can be left behind and love can become a reality.”¹

Wright says the question is not how we are to do these things – How one is to Love God and one’s neighbor as oneself – but how Jesus does them. Because how Jesus does them will be the thing that empowers us to do them.

What does Jesus do?

He dies a death that destroys the power of sin to forever separate us from God. And he rises from that death and provides for humanity a new way of living that continually loosens sin’s grip – a way that allows us to love God and neighbor and ourselves. The way involves a regular practice of death and resurrection, of recognizing when we have slipped away from God, of turning back to God and being welcomed home in that turning. Both of which – the path to repentance and the path to forgiveness, are always at hand thanks to Jesus. And both of which, thanks to Jesus, require a profound faith in the power of his death and resurrection to allow us to live that life eternally. That’s what Christian faith ultimately is.

Jesus is how God loves us with all of the divine mind and heart and strength. In Jesus, God becomes the neighbor that we must love as ourselves, the Divine presence hiding within every face. This is what Jesus meant when he said “whatever you do the least of these, you do to me.”

And so that original advice from Leviticus and from Hillel and from Jesus is for us as well – we are expected to love God and neighbor in a way that is inextricably bound. And both require faith. Sometimes I think it is much harder to have faith in people than it is in God.

The rest is commentary, go and learn, Hillel says. And the rest is truly easier said than done. The Golden Rule and all the sage advice of today’s gospel are indeed distillations, bullion cubes that you best not pop in your mouth and begin to chew. Rather they are meant to be steeped in in the life of faith and sipped and savored over the duration.

So I’ll leave you with a bit of that commentary to sip and savor, in the form of a wisdom story from Ethiopia:

Long ago, in Ethiopia, a woman married a widower who had a son. Her joy was great when she went to live in the home of her new husband, for she longed for a child. But the child refused her affections, saying, “You are not my mother.” He refused her cooking, tore her mending, and turned away from her kindness .

After some time, the sorrowing woman decided to seek the help of a wise hermit who lived on the mountain. “Make me a potion, “ She begged, “so my stepson will love me as I love him.”

¹ Wright, N. T.. Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28 (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 94). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

“You must bring me a whisker of a living lion.” The Hermit replied.

The woman went away in great distress. But determined not to give up . that night, while her family slept, she crept out of the village to the edge of the desert, carrying a bowl of meat. She knew that a great lion lived near some rocks quite a distance away. She walked under the night sky as close to the lion as she dared. Hearing him roar, she dropped the bowl and ran back home. Again, the next night, she sneaked from the house with a bowl of meat. She walked farther into the desert until she could see the form of the lion on the distant rocks. She set down her bowl and ran home.

Every night she drew closer to the lion before setting down her bowl and fleeing for home. Every night the lion ate her food. Finally one night, after many weeks, she placed down her bowl and stepped back but did not run. She watched the huge cat come slowly forward and eat from the bowl. The following night, she placed down the bowl and did not move away. The lion came slowly forward and began to eat from the bowl. She reached out and stroked his fur. He made happy sounds in his throat.

“Thank you, dear friend, “ She said and carefully snipped a whisker from his chin.

She moved slowly away and then ran all the way to the wise Hermit's hut.

”I've brought you the whisker of a living lion,” She called, running into his hut. The hermit was sitting before his fire. He took the whisker and examined it closely .

“You have indeed” He said, and dropped the whisker into the fire.

“What have you done? She cried. “That was the whisker for the love potion. You don't know how hard it was to obtain. it has taken me months to win the trust of the lion.”

“ Can the love and trust of a child be harder to obtain than that of a wild Beast? He asked her. “Go home and think on what you have done.”

And the woman went home to live out the answer she had been given. And we return home as well with the answer God gives us when we dare to ask for big truths with little questions like what is the greatest commandment, and can we learn it while standing on one foot?

And truly the answers are simple enough. But it is in the commentary that they are lived out, it's in the go and learn where we are meant to spend the rest of our lives.

Amen.