

Matthew 22:34-36
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

Love of God and Neighbor is a Messy Business

"'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. On these two these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Well it sounds really good but how in the world are we supposed to do that---exactly?"

Most often when we hear these words we think of outreach programs, good deeds, growing in understanding and tolerance. We point to the homeless as a true neighbor, or we exhort love of the person who is most unlike ourselves; those folks whose cultures, values or lifestyles are difficult for us to understand, but we need to work at loving them anyway---and these are worthy things to think on.

But sometimes, I wonder if it we aren't trying to "work" these great commandments a bit too much. Often they become like a set of rules we must follow in order to be holy folks. But Jesus is teaching us constantly that that kind of thinking leads us into a trap. For Jesus the love of God and neighbor isn't meant to be exercised in a controlled environment, but lived out in all of its risky, messy, chaotic and confusing detail.

I wonder about those experiences all of us have had that help us realize with a sharp clarity, that regardless of economic status, career path, race, creed, color or national origin, there are universal truths and experiences that are common to whole human family.

What are those things or experiences--- across the human spectrum--- that are universal? I think I would say that grief at the loss of someone we love is probably at the top of the list. A love of our families, love of our children, a desire to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging to something greater than our selves—I think these might be common to all people across every strata of culture and society.

Maybe true love of God with heart, soul and mind and deep love of neighbor happens at those sad and precarious intersections of our lives where we are the most fragile and vulnerable.

I imagine that a Palestinian mother feels the same gut wrenching sense of despair when she loses a beloved child to violence as does the Israelite mother.

A rejection or betrayal by a trusted friend, spouse, or partner hurts men and women with equal force; it has the same power to pull both genders into a place where we wonder if we will ever trust again.

And joyful moments—those too can be universal in the human family---seeing a new baby smile, watching a gorgeous sunrise or sunset, hearing a longed for "I love you " for the first time...these are things we all long to experience no matter what else divides us.

I remember a very poignant experience in my own life that had the effect of crystallizing love of God and neighbor into bright and brilliant focus; an event that at least for me spoke to the common ground of the human condition that has the power to tear down any kind of us/them, me/you, divisions between God's people.

In my first year of Seminary, I was doing my chaplaincy at St. Elizabeth's Mental Hospital in Washington, D. C. It was a ten week rotation and the regular staff just barely connected with summer chaplains because they routinely saw us come and go like the wind.

Well, one Sunday I was doing my first service at the big St. Elizabeth's Chapel. The congregation on any given Sunday was made up of some people from the community, but mostly it was made up of the patients who had a bit more freedom that included what they called "worship privileges" and we also got a lot of homeless people who would just come in off the street, because the gates were open on Sunday.

Now, the rule at St. Elizabeth's always was that if you brought your belongings; your pocketbook or your wallet, into the Chapel with you, you had to lock it up in your locker.

We served a very fragile community for whom theft was just one more way to survive---there was no judgment in this because we understood that desperate people typically do desperate things and leaving ready cash out before a starving man or addict was an invitation to heartbreak for everyone.

But, of course, this was my first time preaching at a giant mental hospital, and I knew I was going to be preaching to schizophrenics and homeless people and Baptists and Methodists and Roman Catholics---and for a clergy person in training that was a tall and stressful order.

So, I am a little nervous, with the first-time jitters - remember, first year of Seminary - and I go in, drop my bag in the sacristy, run around getting ready, and go to the service. The service goes wonderfully; nobody died and nobody got injured as a result of my performance and so I put that one in the "win" column.

So relieved and thankful I go back into the sacristy, and, as soon as I enter in and see my bag sitting there, where I haven't locked it up, I think to myself, "This is probably bad".

And, sure enough, there was my wallet, laying out on the side, and all of the contents of that big fat pocket on the outside where you keep your money and stuff, where you want to get to it pretty quick - it was all gone.

Now, as a first-year seminarian, I had all of \$30 in that wallet, which was a fortune for me at the time, but not a great loss in terms of finances.

But, in that same side pocket, was a wallet-sized picture of my mother, whom I had just lost to cancer four weeks before. And I had pulled this picture out of all the pictures I had of her and was carrying it around with me, because it was one of my favorites and somehow, it kept her with me as I was grieving this loss.

And losing that little picture just pierced me through the heart! It felt like, in losing that picture, I had somehow lost her all over again. So all I could think about was getting that picture.

So, without thinking really the first thing I did was start going through all of the garbage cans. I was thinking that all they had really wanted was the money, so all of the other stuff was probably just dumped close by.

So, I start digging through all of the garbage cans in the Chapel and find nothing. Still frantic I go right outside to the front gate of this huge old mental institution.

Now, St. Elizabeth's sits at a pretty rough intersection in a pretty scary part of town. Part of our orientation included instructions on how to respond if we were walking on the grounds and gunfire broke out nearby. And on Sundays the gates are open to everybody, and let's just say you get a lot of interesting people and activities happening at that gate on Sundays---and you get a lot of interesting trash, as well!

But I was so grief stricken that I just didn't care. I knew that that picture of my mother had to be on these grounds somewhere so I immediately started going through every filthy garbage can I could find.

Now, as I was headed to about my second garbage can, there was this picnic area where everybody ate, and someone recognized me and said, "Chaplain Parker! Why are you going through the trash?"

I was very distraught, and I said, "somebody stole the stuff out of my wallet, and I had a picture of my mother in there, and my mother just died a few weeks ago, and I really want that picture back, and I don't care about the money, but if I could just get that picture. . ."

So, off I go to the next can. I am completely committed to my frantic search and I am looking and looking and looking, and looking - finally, self defeat and sorrow claim me and I look up just feeling hopeless and grubby, realizing that I will never find the picture.

But as the world around me came back into focus I witnessed the strangest sight. Everybody is going through the trash --- everybody! The homeless guys that come in off the street; the guy, Marvin, who wore a foil umbrella on his head! The guards at the gate who would never really talk to me because I was a short-timer ---- they are going through the garbage cans, looking for this picture of my mother.

Then suddenly, from behind the Chapel comes an individual, holding the picture and a couple of other cards from inside my wallet. What was lost was found and, chances are, this might have even been the guy that took it. Quite frankly, I didn't care. All I knew was that I had this precious picture back in my hands. Everybody started clapping and smiling—and I was crying like a baby.

And then for the next three weeks or so someone mentioned it almost every day---patients, gate guards, other staff, even the homeless guys I saw almost every day, "Chaplain, I am so glad we got that picture of your mother back!"

In that crazy weird little moment of my unrestrained grief and loss, everything that made all of us so very different and stratified just ceased to exist. For just a brief tender and tenuous time the barriers between all of us fell away and something amazing happened; love claimed our hearts without restriction.

Unfettered and free from the ways we were all supposed to be different or fearful of one another fell away and for just one brief and shining moment we loved one another as God loves us. We were elbow deep in some pretty rank garbage, but pure and perfect and holy in understanding and love.

"'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.

Maybe the secret to living the great Commandment is just being willing to dig around in the trash in solidarity with someone else's pain and then celebrate like the victory is your own when sorrow turns into joy. I think maybe those are the days when God smiles down upon us all in delight for what God has made.

God has set us on a lifelong journey—together---- and exhorts us to love one another. Maybe all that this lifelong task really requires is our willingness to be surprised and delighted by what that love turns out to be...Amen.