

THE HEART OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Forty years ago, the United States Justice Department began a two-year project to determine the total number of federal criminal laws. A Justice Department official named Ronald Gainer headed up the study which eventually drew up a list of about 3,000 criminal offenses. According to Mr. Gainer, “this effort came as part of a long and ultimately failed campaign to persuade Congress to revise the criminal code, which by the 1980s was scattered among fifty titles and 23,000 pages of federal law.” More frankly, Mr. Gainer said of the effort, “You will have died and been resurrected three times, and still not have an answer to this question” of how many federal criminal laws there are.¹ Remember, that 1982 study concentrated on tallying only federal criminal laws. After forty additional years of legislation across all areas of federal law, how do you suppose U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts would answer the question, “Chief, which federal law is the first of all?”

The North Carolina General Statutes table of contents lists 168+ chapters of laws. How do you suppose North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein would answer the question, “Mr. Attorney General, which North Carolina statute is the first of all?”

The official 2022 Major League Baseball rulebook is 142 pages long plus definitions of terms. How do you suppose MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred would answer the question, “Commissioner, which baseball rule is the first of all?”

One article claimed that the National Basketball Association needed only twenty-six rules to explain how the game is played. However, the NBA rulebook takes fifty-nine pages to explain those twenty-six rules. How do you suppose NBA Commissioner Adam Silver would answer the question, “Commissioner, which basketball rule is the first of all?”

In the 5th and 6th centuries A.D., religious scholars set out to determine how many laws are listed in the Hebrew scriptures from Genesis – Deuteronomy. They arrived at a total of 613 Jewish commandments. We don’t have to wonder how Jesus would answer the question, “Which commandment is the first of all?” because we know Jesus’s answer: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’” (Mark 12:29-30)

It’s no wonder the scribe readily agreed with Jesus about which commandment is the greatest. After all, that is the first commandment (“You shall have no other gods before me.” Exodus 20:3) and the foundation of the Hebrew faith (“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Deuteronomy 6:4-5) The astute scribe was impressed with Jesus’s debating skills and he initiated a typical theological/biblical

conversation with Jesus. In turn, Jesus was duly impressed with the scribe's knowledge of and insight into the true meaning of the law and Jesus commended him.

Of course, Jesus added a second commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:32; Leviticus 19:18), a commandment which the scribe would also have been familiar with. However, Jesus put a new twist on the two commandments by pairing them and weaving them together to describe the desired life orientation toward God and neighbor – if you will, the heart of the Christian faith. In his book, *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine of Hippo wrote, "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he [or she] understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all."²

And, of course, there is the other lawyer's famous and timeless question of Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29) He wanted Jesus to give him a list of people he **had** to love so he wouldn't have to worry about all of the rest of **them**. Instead, Jesus told a story, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead." (Luke 10:30) Of course, the twist in this story is, instead of giving the lawyer a list of people to love as your neighbor, Jesus told a story about what it means to love as a neighbor. And, surprise, surprise! The neighbor turned out to be the hated Samaritan, the one who showed the man mercy. Jesus's conclusion? "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:37)

In his article about the Great Commandment called "Under the Gaze of the Emperor: Who Is My Neighbor?" Emerson Powery, professor of Biblical Studies at Messiah University in Pennsylvania writes, "The treatment of the neighbor says more about one's theological commitments than any ecclesial confession. Indeed, how one defines the neighbor – that is, how one determines who is one's neighbor – reveals the kind of God in whom one believes."³ American writer Anne Lamott puts it a bit more bluntly, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

Speaking of "the image of God," it has been suggested that a good way to understand "love your neighbor as yourself" is to see each and every person as created in the image of God, just as you are, and to treat them accordingly. Hand in hand with that goes the kind of love Jesus is talking about (and pretty much everywhere else in the New Testament) – *agape* love, love in action, the kind of love that looks out for the interests of the other person, at least as much as you look out for your own interests, if not more. Here's how 1 John 3:17 puts it: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"

The lawyer who asked Jesus "Who is my neighbor?" probably walked away disappointed that Jesus didn't give him the list he wanted. But maybe, just maybe, he also walked away thinking about the true meaning of what it means to be a neighbor. Maybe, just maybe, that lawyer eventually came to the conclusion that the other scribe/lawyer voiced, that to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself "is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Mark 12:33)

Then again, even if the lawyer understood Jesus's story and its meaning, maybe he just didn't want to do what Jesus said to do or he didn't know how to do what Jesus said to do. Because, you know, it's hard, isn't it? In his book called *A Room Called Remember*, Frederick Buechner writes, "A legalistic religion like the Pharisees' is in some ways very appealing. All you have to do in any kind of ethical dilemma is look it up in the book and act accordingly. Jesus, on the other hand, says all you have to do is love God and your neighbors. That may seem more appealing still until, in dilemma after dilemma, you try to figure out just how to go about doing it. The difficulty is increased when you realize that by loving God and your neighbors, Jesus doesn't mean loving as primarily a feeling. Instead, he seems to mean that whether or not any feeling is involved, loving God means honoring and obeying and staying in constant touch with God, and loving your neighbors means acting in their best interests no matter what, even if personally you can't stand them."⁴

Tuesday night, the board of directors of Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries met here at our church. The executive director, Jeralene Merritt, reported an increase in client applications, with the majority of clients requesting rent assistance. According to FairHousing.com, the fair rental value for two- and three-bedroom homes ranges from \$737 to \$911 a month.⁵ But Jeralene talked about serving clients who are facing much higher rents and evictions. What does it mean to love your neighbor in such situations? Obviously, supporting the ministries of DCOM (and other agencies and non-profits, especially these days) is one way, maybe even a relatively easy way. A much harder way, of course, is to work to change and design systems that will afford neighbors the same opportunities to reach the same goals (e.g., safe and affordable housing, insurance, food, etc.) that we spend much time and energy obtaining and maybe even taking for granted.

Ah, and we thought loving God and loving neighbor was hard enough even when it was just kind of general in nature, didn't we? Mother Teresa once said, "I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that He will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us – and we change things."⁶

Fellow alum of Union Presbyterian Seminary, Rev. Thom Shuman, writes poetry and reflections based on scripture lessons. In a poem he calls "then what," Thom imagines what might have happened *after* Jesus and the scribe agreed on what is the first commandment of all . . .

*then what
did they go off
and share a pizza
and a pitcher;
did they agree
to disagree;
did they shake their heads
as the other walked away;*

*did one say,
'if you knew
my neighbors
the way I do;'
while the other laughed,
'if you knew
God the way I do;'*

*after they agreed
that love was what
was most important,
yet almost impossible
to live out,
what did they do next?*

Episcopal priest Rev. David Sellery reminds us what do next once we agree that loving God and loving neighbor is the heart of the Christian faith: “Large or small, we must bring love to the tasks of today. We work in the love of God. We eat, sleep and rise in his presence. Every task is an opportunity to return and to spread his love. The joy, the sorrow, the boredom, the routines of our day: all are there to be undertaken in love. As Mother Teresa reminds us: ‘It is not how much we do that is pleasing to God, but how much love we put into the doing.’”⁷

What better way to end a sermon about loving God and loving neighbor than to share a story about Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian minister who hosted Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood on PBS from 1968 –2001. Mister Rogers opened each episode singing “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” Mister Rogers sent one of his most powerful messages about being a neighbor in episode 1065 which aired on May 9, 1969. Mister Rogers invited Officer Clemmons, a black police officer on the show, to cool his feet in a children’s wading pool. Officer Clemmons at first declined because he didn’t have a towel, but Mister Rogers said he could use his. So, in 1969, when many swimming pools in the United States were still racially segregated, black Officer Clemmons and white Mister Rogers sat side-by-side and cooled their feet in the children’s swimming pool. After Officer Clemmons had used Mister Rogers’ towel to dry his feet and left, Mister Rogers used the same towel to dry his feet.

In episode 1663 (appropriately called “Love”) which aired in 1993, Mister Rogers is sitting outside soaking his feet in a pool. Officer Clemmons shows up for an unexpected (and final) visit to the show. While Officer Clemmons (actually an award-winning opera singer) sang “Many Ways to Say I Love You,” he and Mister Rogers once again soaked their feet together in the pool. At the end, Mister Rogers took his towel and dried Officer Clemmons’ feet.

Love God. Love neighbor. As you’ve heard me say before, quoting Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow from the Montreat Youth Conference several years ago, “It’s all that easy. It’s all that hard.” But it’s the heart of our Christian faith. It’s what God calls us to do.

Let us pray: God, help us see the world as you see it. Help us explore the depths of our hearts, minds, souls, and strength as we offer them fully to you. God, make our love for our neighbor look like the love among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the love you have given us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Jeanine Cali, “Frequent Reference Question: How Many Federal Laws Are There?” March 12, 2013 at www.blogs.loc.gov/law

²Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson Jr (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 30.

³Emerson Powery, “Under the Gaze of the Emperor: Who Is My Neighbor?” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, April 2008, 144.

⁴Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember: Uncollected Pieces* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984).

⁵“Duplin County NC 2022 Fair Market Rents” at www.USHousingData.com.

⁶Found in a sermon by Dr. Sandra L. Randleman, First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN, November 4, 2012, “The Greatest Love” at www.fpcnashville.org.

⁷Rev. David F. Sellery, “The Great Lover” at www.blogtalkradio.com/frsellery/2015/11/20/the-great-lover