

Rev Neil Millar
22:34-40

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew

According to Franciscan monk, Richard Rohr, 'Two universal and prime paths of transformation have been available to every human being' since the beginning - 'great love and great suffering.' The older I get and the more time I spend with elderly people, the more I appreciate what Rohr is saying. These two *are* primary spiritual teachers and, as is illustrated so clearly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, they *are* intimately connected. Love and suffering go together.

In the readings we've just heard, the path of *love* is addressed directly. In an attempt to trap and discredit Jesus (a most unloving motive) a lawyer, speaking on behalf of a group of Pharisees, poses a question: 'Teacher,' of all the commandments, which is the greatest?' 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind,' says Jesus, 'and... you shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

We're all familiar with these words - they lie at the heart of our faith - we were created *by* love, *for* love. It makes sense and we assume we know what it means but do we? Did the Pharisees? When I think of the suffering inflicted upon Jesus by these religious authorities, the suffering we Christians have inflicted on others in the name of love, I wonder if we really do.

This morning I'd like to look again at a very familiar text. In so doing I pray we might glimpse something that will help us inhabit these commandments more truthfully, more faithfully, more transformatively.

For a start, did you notice that we're not commanded to love God in the abstract but very specifically to love '*the LORD* your God.' That is, Yahweh, the God with a recorded history and clear claims on our allegiance; the God who addressed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob personally and who spoke with Moses and the prophets, the God who's known you and me since before we were born, who called us by name and sought us out, the God who cares and hears and acts. To love this God is to love the One who first loved us, our love is only and always a *responding* love, an answering love.

And, what *of* this response? How *do* we love a God who loves in the manner and with the generosity that God loves us?

Well, however it's experienced and expressed in any particular moment, our response is somehow connected to the *whole* of us – heart, mind and soul, and somehow also to our love of neighbour, for as Jesus says here, a second commandment is 'just like it'. He reiterates this teaching later in the gospel when he says that whenever we reach out in love to those who are hungry or homeless or sick or in prison, we are also reaching out to him.

So, you can see, it's all of a one: our love of our neighbour *flows from* and *proves the truth of* our love of God, but even more profoundly, it is *the same* love. Jesus is not referring to two separate loves here, or even to one love divided up like a pie, but rather to one all encompassing way of being. 'Authentic love is of one piece,' says Richard Rohr, 'how you love anything is how you love everything.'

If this is true, and it makes sense, then it has some significant implications. To focus on the second commandment for a moment, and a disconcerting thought: Could it be that problems in our relationships and world are caused precisely because we *do* love our neighbour as we love ourselves but that our love is limited and conditional? It may look and feel like love but it is not true love because it does not come from the truth within us, from our *whole* heart and soul and mind. And why is that? Because deep down *we're* not whole! Because the self *with which* we love is not our whole and true self.

So, how we become a *whole* self, a person capable of loving as Jesus commands? Well, this brings us back to the experience of *being loved* already and to the effect of loving yourself.

First, being loved. The scriptures are consistent in conveying the truth that God has always loved us; when we were still far off God met us in Christ and brought us home – home to ourselves, God is love and God never ceases loving us. This is a powerfully liberating truth, for when I can accept that God loves all of me as I am (even my shadow), I enter a new freedom to accept and *be* myself, and also, paradoxically, a new freedom to *become* myself, my truest most complete self, the self that God always intended me to become,

the self with a capacity for authentic love. As you dwell in God's unconditional love so love fills you, forming and transforming you, flowing *from* you – the *whole* you.

So, loving God and your neighbour is directly connected with letting God love you, but it is also connected to your willingness to love *yourself*. Many of us in the church have assumed that any talk of self-love is sub-Christian and narcissistic. The very notion can make us feel uneasy. Commonly, we've believed that we are to love God and neighbour *instead* of self; or, if we *can* love ourselves, then we must at least love these others more. But this is not what Jesus says. We are love God with our whole self and love our neighbour *as* ourself. Remember, how you love anything is how you love everything. How we love our neighbour then is conditioned by the way we love ourselves, which is why Jesus made this connection in the text. If we cannot accept and love the whole of ourselves (as God does) then we sure as anything won't be able to accept and love our neighbour as themselves. Do you find yourself subtly judging your neighbour? I wonder, could this judgement flow from deeper judgement of yourself, from a lack of self-acceptance?

Don't misunderstand me here. Loving your whole self is not a blank cheque for self-indulgent attitudes and destructive behaviour. As I've said before, God loves us as we are and yet this love is also transformative. God wants the best for us. A willingness to cooperate and be changed is a sign that we love ourselves enough to want this too. Of course, this takes time and patience; it involves the humble, courageous, often painful work of discerning and naming our untruth. The parts of us that are unholy and unhealthy - our addictions and prejudices, our sorrows and sins, fears and angers - are transformed only as they are acknowledged and brought into the light of God's love. As long as we neglect, hide, despise or defend them, we remain divided and they retain their power to undermine our love for others. Divided people live divided lives.

All the same, our healing comes as much through prayerfully trusting as through moral effort. If your experience is like mine, then you'll know that you cannot make yourself whole by willpower or merely trying harder - those efforts frequently tie us up in pretense and ever-tightening knots. Not to mention the impact of constantly failing. What makes us whole is opening ourselves and letting ourselves be in the way of God's love – 'in Christ' is how Paul puts it. I find the practice of meditation or contemplative prayer really helpful here. Daily, in the silent, waiting place of prayer I sit calmly before [God's] 'uncanny and utterly safe Presence,' I allow the divine gaze gently to pervade my unconscious self, the place, says Richard Rohr, 'where 95 percent of our motivations and reactions come from.' Gradually, over time, I realise I am changing (being changed); everything is becoming new.

Thus, the commandment to love, which sounds so active and energetic, may have as much to do with willingly receiving and resting in God's love as it has to do with wilfulness and striving. The love of God is utterly gracious; it is the only love that can take you as you are, all the while working like yeast within, healing and transforming you at the deepest levels, loving you into wholeness, opening you in love to others.

And what all this means is that in the end, God's great commandment to love is also God's great *invitation* – as we respond, so we receive what our loving God longs to give us and the whole world – our fullest life, our truest being, the joy of deep and compassionate communion. And the great thing; we can respond afresh every day, for as the writer of Lamentations reminded God's people all those years ago, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies are new every morning... new, even today....