
Almost Christian

Matthew 22:34-46

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery at Duke Chapel on October 26, 2014

There are commandments that we live by. The Ten Commandments: you shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself an idol; you shall not use the Lord's name in vain; remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy; honor your father and your mother (its parents weekend so you can nudge your kids on that one); you shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor; you shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor. My math teachers had their own commandments as well: thou shall not write thy math papers in ink nor divide any number by zero. We may not remember those commandments but surely many of us remember our parents' commandments that are etched on our minds and hearts and give us a bout of the heebie jeebies—use your manners; say please and thank you; clean up after yourself; take out the garbage; tidy up your room; wash behind your ears; treat others as you want to be treated; settle down; act your age; take that out of your mouth. But there are also commandments for parents, especially of teenagers: thou shalt not make any small talk with random strangers in line at the grocery store, for this shall affect the teen's reputation in a negative way; and, remember thou art for transportation and money purposes only. Any other attempts at relevancy shall affect the teen's reputation in a negative way. Commandments to live by.

We may lay down the rule of law in the form of any commandment, but even that law should ultimately hang on the rule of love. At least this is what Jesus teaches. And let me give you some advice. Don't ever try to test Jesus. You'll never win. The religious and civic leaders are trying to trap him and seek to engage him in one of their many legal disputes with hopes of getting him to deny or usurp the authority of Moses thus discrediting him. But he keeps amazing and astounding people with his teaching. The Pharisees ask Jesus, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

They must forget that Jesus was Jewish too. He knew the sacred law. He followed it in such a manner that actually fulfilled it. He was always trying to make the law what it was supposed to be. His answer is not catchy enough to make late night breaking news—nothing fancy or juicy. He just recites the Hebrew scriptures, "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."

The greatest is not the "float like a butterfly sting like a bee" famed boxer, Muhammad Ali who always boasted that he was the prettiest and greatest. Jesus quotes a part of Deuteronomy 6 that is a portion of the lead paragraph for what is known as the 'Shema,' a central text to Jewish liturgy and life. In Deuteronomy, it says, 'Hear (Shema), O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.' Then we get to the words Jesus quotes –to love God with your soul, heart, and mind. According to the tradition of the day, the Jewish people are to recite this twice daily, to keep these words in their heart, recite them to their children, talk about them in their home, bind them as a sign on their hands, fix them as an emblem on their forehead, write them on the doorposts of their house and gates. This was the heart of religion. God was the heart, the center, not humanity, our wishes and wants, unlike what one popular megachurch pastor's wife recently said—that when we worship, we're not doing it for God really. We're doing it for ourselves. Huh? The Shema and Jesus preach something else—love God with all of your being, inside and outside. That's primary. That's the heart of worship. The first and greatest commandment.

And loving God sounds good and foundational and even safe. But Jesus is never safe. Jesus never lets us off the hook. We may think he's just a holy hippie with all of that love talk—"free love." Following him, though, is always risky and he loves to mess with our religion. He links loving God with loving neighbor. The second commandment he quotes is from that very enjoyable, entertaining biblical book known as Leviticus. It's

basically a Priests' Manual full of a holiness code. Jesus quotes 'love your neighbor as yourself' out of a context where neighbor includes the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien or the foreigner, and the fellow Israelite. Jesus covers all of the bases and holds the people's love and law accountable. By linking the love of God with love of neighbor he reveals that the total fulfillment of loving God is wrapped up with love of neighbor.

Love is not emotional but behavioral and manifests through care for the welfare of others, especially the least of these, not 'the lots of these.' Love and the law are not in opposition but "God's Law is the law of love" (Delman Coates). The religious law is ultimately fulfilled through love. No ifs, ands, or buts. Love is a choice, a commitment to the other. And a commitment to God, the wholly other, is fundamentally tied to a commitment to our neighbor.

Jesus doesn't want us to be 'almost Christian' but what John Wesley called an 'altogether Christian.' Wesley preached a sermon at Oxford University in 1741 that he called "The Almost Christian." In that sermon he says that the almost Christian is sincere and "does nothing which the gospel forbids" and there is a form of godliness. But the altogether Christian includes the love of God, love of neighbor and faith that works by love. An altogether Christian pulls it all together such that love of God and love of neighbor converge into one love. Jesus doesn't want any half-baked, half-baptized Christians because as Wesley says, "The Church is full of almost Christians who have not gone all the way with Christ." There may be the form without the full substance. The liturgy without the liturgy after the liturgy. We wouldn't want to be or go to an almost doctor or almost lawyer so why settle for being almost Christian?

Some have placed other laws or rules in place of love. They'd rather be right than filled with righteous love. The latest issue—war, sexuality, political parties, poverty—is made to muzzle what Jesus really says and then we act as if the only thing at stake is a sense of theological purity. Right doctrine. Right belief. Right order of worship. Right color of the carpet in the sanctuary. Right role for children in worship. All the while we may actually be getting it totally wrong when it comes to love.

We've made up other rules—you have to attend church, a bible study, pray everyday early in the morning, meditate on your bed day and night. This is not to say that these are not important for spiritual development but the greatest commandment is to love. People ask, "Have you been to church lately?" But do we ever hear the question, "Have you loved anyone recently?" It should be no surprise that there are not-so-positive perceptions of Christians that make people say, "I have nothing against God; it's his fan club I can't stand." Many times people don't dislike Jesus, they just don't like Christians or at least the almost Christians.

Our rules, our constructs, our beliefs and dogma sometimes reign over the ultimate rule of love. A philosophy or ideology over humanity? This is where we've lost our souls and pierced our hearts such that all drops of love are drained out. Like Jesus says of those in his day, we don't practice what we teach and "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others" (Mt 23). Our rules oppress the already depressed, antithetical to the very heart of the gospel.

I've shared this story with the choir and others recently and have taken it on the road. During late summer, I received a call from Duke Hospital. A hospital chaplain asked if I would surprise a man waiting for a heart transplant with a visit as a way to lift his spirits. I assured the chaplain that Coach K of the Duke Men's Basketball team might offer a better surprise visit; the chaplain disagreed. He said that this particular patient had become "enthralled" with Duke Chapel while in the hospital through watching of our worship services on his hospital TV. The chaplain told me that many heart transplant patients require antidepressants when waiting for a new heart. But for this gentleman, he said, Duke Chapel was his antidepressant.

With God's help, we, Christians, can be spiritual antidepressants on this campus, in the nation and world because love heals and lifts when nothing else will help. We don't have to be the spiritual police, judge and jury. What we are commanded to do is love. When my days on earth are done, I don't want the epitaph on my tombstone to read, "Hey! Get off me!" or "he preached" or "he sang." I want it to say "He loved." I want to be known as a lover—lover of God and neighbor whoever they may be because they will know we are Christians by our love.

It's not always that our rules mute the law of love. Sometimes it's the way the love of God becomes so segregated from the love of neighbor. Fundamentally, offering one's whole self—heart, soul, and mind—to God is admirable and the center of faith. Christians may disagree a lot about political candidates—Kay Hagan or Thom Tillis—but many will agree that the love of God is the heart of faith.

The danger is, however, when we are so addicted to God that we actually inflict others, even if unknowingly. Like alcohol, drugs, sex, or the Internet, we can use God for our own purposes. Using God when we're supposed to be worshipping him. Using God to numb pain or emptiness but not asking for healing and getting the concrete help we need. Using God to avoid dealing with a problem or finding a solution. Using God as a distraction from everyday life. Using God, ironically, while ignoring others. Just saying the name 'Jesus' doesn't make one a disciple of Jesus; people say "Jesus Christ" all the time when they get hurt or are upset. Just saying 'Jesus' doesn't make you just. One can endorse atrocities with religiosity as we see throughout history. You can say you love God and still not love neighbor, especially the poor, the widow, the orphan, the foreigner. A lot of things can be done in the name of God that has nothing to do with God or love. Venom can be validated with religious language all the time. Thus, even as a homiletics professor, it is important to not just preach Jesus, but also preach what Jesus preached and do what Jesus did.

Preaching Jesus sounds like a really good theological construct. Really religious. Really sanctified. Really Christian. But it becomes hazardous when it is solely a pure, theological idea of loving God alone without any reference to human beings. We can make loving God such a dogmatic rule that it squeezes love out of it such that following God, even in a nation whose motto is "in God we trust," can be disconnected from just and equitable social, economic, and legal systems.

During the so-called "war on drugs" in this country, "imagine you are Emma Faye Stewart, a thirty-year-old, single ... mother of two who was arrested as part of a drug sweep in Hearne, Texas...You are innocent. After a week in jail, you have no one to care for your two small children and are eager to get home. Your court-appointed attorney urges you to plead guilty to a drug distribution charge, saying the prosecutor has offered probation. You refuse, steadfastly proclaiming your innocence. Finally, after almost a month in jail, you decide to plead guilty so you can return home to your children. Unwilling to risk a trial and years of imprisonment, you are sentenced to ten years probation and ordered to pay \$1,000 in fines, as well as court and probation costs. You are also now branded a drug felon. You are no longer eligible for food stamps; you may be discriminated against in employment; you cannot vote for at least twelve years; and you are about to be evicted from public housing. Once homeless, your children will be taken from you and put in foster care.

A judge eventually dismisses all cases against the defendants who did not plead guilty. At trial, the judge finds that the entire sweep was based on the testimony of a single informant who lied to the prosecution. You, however, are still a drug felon, homeless, and desperate to regain custody of your children." (Michelle Alexander)

Where have we gone off track? Maybe because who we deem neighbor looks and acts just like us. Maybe we are almost human and haven't discovered how to really love yet. Maybe we are almost just, almost merciful, almost Christian, but not quite there yet. We may preach and sing Jesus without preaching what Jesus preached and doing what Jesus did. And what did he do? He embodied such love that he sat and ate with the unclean, the unwanted, and the unwelcomed, the least of these not 'the lots of these.' Jesus knew what he was doing when he doesn't just command to love God but includes the love of neighbor. He adds that addendum—love neighbor—and he connects the two because he doesn't want us to get so lost in God that we lose sight of those around us and forget that love of God leads to love of neighbor and there is no other way to follow Jesus all the way.

"How can I say that I love the Lord whom I've never ever seen before; and forget to say that I love the one whom I walk beside each and every day? How can I look upon your face and ignore God's love? You I must embrace! You're my brother; you're my sister; and I love you with the love of the Lord"(V. Michael McKay). "I would love the church," some say, "if it wasn't for the people." But the people are the church. Jesus won't allow us to escape into a speculative orbit of ideas about love because love has a face and is a practice. It's ethical, embodied, and incarnate. It's concrete.

In her book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, my former Princeton colleague and United Methodist minister, Kenda Dean, writes that adolescents follow a tacit creed called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism; it is a “self-emolliating spirituality; its thrust is personal happiness and helping people treat each other nicely.” God is at arm’s length, watches over them but makes no demands of them. “God, above all else, is ‘nice.’” This finding came out of a 2003-2005 National Study of Youth and Religion that states teenagers practice this form of spirituality not because they misunderstood what they’ve been taught in church but because this is what they were taught in church.

Love of God requires something of us and from us. God is not nice. God is love and it’s not cheap. God’s love demands and commands love of neighbor. Otherwise it is not real love, but almost love. Loving God can become a form of psychological and spiritual therapeutic escape from the world, a docetic type of Christianity that specializes in anti-humanism, if we aren’t careful. And how can we carry crosses and hang crosses around our necks, and even sit in a building that is in the shape of a cross, a tool of execution, and not care for those being executed everyday? Love is enfleshed in hands (like in the bulletin) and feet. Love walks for justice and peace.

“Jesus walks,” according to Kanye West, and where he walks is where he calls us to go.

To the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers even the strippers

(Jesus walks with them)

To the victims of Welfare for we living in hell here...

(Jesus walks with them)

Now hear ye hear ye want to see Thee more clearly

I know he hear me when my feet get weary

.....

I ain't here to argue about his facial features

Or here to convert atheists into believers

I'm just trying to say the way school need teachers

The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way I need Jesus

“True love begs to be shared”(Kenda Dean) and offered like open hands, the nail scarred hands of Jesus. To follow Jesus, to do what Jesus says and do what Jesus does, means suffering love. And what he does soon in this gospel is die because he loves the world. His command to love is really a call to die, to follow him all the way to his love unto death. I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back. But that means I’ve decided to die because I’m dying to love. Protestant Reformer Martin Luther said “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” Even if I knew it would be unaccepted. I would still love. Jesus loves me this I know, but what we really want to know from each other, and what Jesus, in his own humanity, wanted to know from one of his own disciples is, “Do you love me?” Let that be your probing question to each other this week.