

*A Greyhound idles by the gate,
aluminum the pink of a hazy sun.
This is Mississippi –
each released man boards with a Bible,
tells how incarceration
and the Lord done changed his ways.
And at the next stop toward Memphis
you can find Bibles by the busload.*
- WilliamNotter.

What people say, and what they intend to do, are sometimes two very different things. The Pharisees contrived a third debate with Jesus, in the gospel lesson today, as part of their campaign to trap Jesus, and pushed the conflict closer to the crisis point. This time they brought their lawyer with them. But in this case, lawyer doesn't mean "Attorney" as we know them. In this context, when you hear "lawyer" think "Seminary Bible Professor", or at most a combination of the two. The Law in question was the Law of Moses. The Pharisees distilled, from not only the Moses stories, but all that grew from them, 613 commandments they had discerned. Their hired-gun Bible professor gave Jesus a pop quiz. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

There was no correct answer. Any answer he gave would have been met with, "Wrong, what about Old '97?" But Jesus immediately responded with the *Shema*, (Hebrew for "Hear", *Shema Israël*, Hear O Israel), a passage that every Jewish child had memorized. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.* But he added, "A second is like it: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* He added it to show his interrogator that he knew what the game was – "On these two commandments hang *all* the law and the prophets."

The "Lawyer's" view of the Law was rule-based. Jesus' view of the Law was love-based. The Law doesn't define Love, Love defines the Law. To love God is to love the *way* God loves, and to love *who* God loves. As the English writer and Christian apologist G.K. Chesterton wrote: "Jesus here tells us we should love our neighbors. Elsewhere the Bible tells us Jesus said we should love our enemies. This is because, generally speaking, they are the same people."

We take Jesus' law of love for granted these days, but that was not so then – not two thousand years ago, in a vastly different culture and time, when life was generally far shorter and harder than it is now. For them to hear that love was the essence of the Law was a radical statement. For us, that God is Love is axiomatic. What scripture is *the* most commonly known to the average person? If not 1 Corinthians 13 – *Faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love*, then it is John 3:16, *For God so loved the world...* We take it for granted that God is Love. Jack Stotts, my ethics professor at McCormick, put it this way: In the time of the Reformers, it was a given that God was powerful, and the question was – "Is the powerful God loving?" The answer the Reformers gave was "yes", and that was Good News. Today we uniformly accept that God is love. The question for *us* is, "Is the loving God powerful?" If the answer is "yes" that will be Good News. That answer is up to us.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is the oldest document in the New Testament, the oldest letter of Paul we know. That's not nothing. It is a serious window into the life of the early church. In this letter Paul sounds almost Christ-like, in the way he approaches his apostleship. His focus is not on himself, even as he shares in a matter-of-fact way how he and his colleagues were "shamefully maltreated at Philippi," as he says. Still, they share the gospel in the face of opposition, and not just the gospel, but their own selves.

What apostleship looked like to Paul was this: *to please God, who tests out hearts... We never came with words of flattery or a pretext for greed... but we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you... you have become very dear to us.* When he used the nurse image, it would have been familiar to his early readers, a known metaphor in Roman writing. The wet-nurse was common in Roman cultural life. Roman use of the image carried a negative and weak connotation. Paul, writing as a male, turned that around, in a strong, male voice describing himself as something like the nurse. This sounds like love – a letter from an apostle in love with a congregation. I totally understand that feeling!

"Love God with all your heart, soul, mind – and your neighbor as yourself." If we become so pharisaical as to parse every single word we risk missing the point. But a word about Love: far more than just feeling emotion, love is a way of being in the world, a certain stance toward our neighbors, and is the fuel, the source, of justice and mercy. It is intention, with power behind it. The church is the community where we raise our young ones to this value. And to say, "love with all your heart, soul and mind" is to say love with your whole self, your whole being, everything you've got. Loving our neighbor is tied to loving God. Jesus told parable about who the neighbor is – the one who needs us, and the one who meets us in our own need. Love God, love your neighbor. Pretty simple.

Back in 2014 the Lou Ann and I led the Youth Group at First Presbyterian in Birmingham to Regions Ball Field to hear the Dalai Lama, the highest holy man of Tibetan Buddhism. The night before, the floor of our building was a sleeping place, as we played host to 50 Tibetan refugees from other parts of the country, there to see the Dalai Lama. He had picked Birmingham to visit because of that city's history as the seedbed of the Civil Rights movement. Since fleeing the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, he has been an international symbol and spokesperson for peace, justice and religious freedom. There were some who raised eyebrows in disapproval, on hearing that the congregation was involved in this way, thinking that any other religious faith should be considered our adversary. But we have no need to be so insecure about our own faith.

"Our prime purpose in life is to help others, and if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them." Words of the XIV Dalai Lama. In one of his most widely read books he wrote: "Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive... It is still my firm conviction that human nature is essentially compassionate, gentle. That is the predominate feature of human nature. Anger, violence and aggression may certainly arise, but... they are not part of our most basic underlying nature." He reminds us that the best relationships are those when your love for each other exceeds your need for each other. These sound like the words of an ally.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The best sermon in context I ever heard preached on this passage was at the Boy Scout National Jamboree in 2001 at Fort A.P. Hill in Virginia.

I was Chaplain at one of the sub-camps, and a leader for a NM council troop. From the time the tents went up, the Jamboree was something like the 10th largest city in Virginia. The different religious faiths all held services that week, for those who chose, and I kicked my son and his friends out of their cots to come hear a friend of mine preach the Protestant East service. At that time Laura Mendenhall was president of Columbia Seminary, and she had been asked to preach that service. I knew Laura from years of stewardship work at the same events.

But the sky opened up and it began to rain buckets. We got word she was delayed by the flooded roads between Richmond and the Fort. It rained some more, and the mud was deep and sloppy. On the sodden hillside, 7,000 Boy Scouts stood in ponchos and slickers, watching myself and a few others cover the microphones with plastic wrap and try to protect the electronics in the tent. Laura didn't show, didn't show. George allowed as how he had a sermon in his back pocket, that he'd rather not preach. Wet, cold, couldn't hear. I could not see any worship happening. We abbreviated the liturgy and began, when a car pulled up at the top of the hill, a very attractive woman got out - Laura Mendenhall in high heels, dressed to the nines, got out and charged down the hill calf-deep in mud, someone following her with an open umbrella, trying to catch up, the eyes of a host of soggy Boy Scouts upon her.

She went to the mic and read two texts – the Ten Commandments and our gospel lesson for today. She said the first commandment is Love God. What's the first commandment? 7,000 Boy Scouts muttered. "You'll have to speak up, I can't hear. It's raining," she said. 7,000 wet Boy Scouts yelled "Love God." She said that every following commandment was how we treat each other because we love God, and Jesus said there were only two things you have to remember, and that's the whole deal. "Two things. Love God, Love your neighbor. What's first? (Love God!) What's second? (Love your neighbor!) Look at me and tell me, What's first? (Love God!) Look at your neighbor and tell me, what's second? (Love your Neighbor! Yelled 7,000 rain-soaked Boy Scouts.) You got it!!!" she said, and was done. That was it. She came all the way from Atlanta just to say that. And when she was finished the energy on the hillside was palpable. Some of those young men who are 35 to 40 now, I'll bet, (at least I imagine), any time they are wet, cold and miserable, think "Love God! Love your neighbor!" Which is exactly the time we most *need* to think that.

Two things. And if we could all do them the world would be a different place.