

## A World Built on Love

It's hard to imagine a more joyous occasion than the baptism of two beautiful little boys. In just a few minutes, Theo and Arthur will be baptized in water and the Spirit as we welcome them into our faith community. We have plenty of reason to celebrate this morning.

It's fitting on this very special occasion that Jesus gives us the Great Commandment in today's Gospel reading. This passage concludes the Temple authorities' unsuccessful attempts to trip Jesus up with clever questions. A lawyer – one of the Temple scholars – asks Jesus to name the greatest commandment, perhaps hoping that his response will be theologically flawed or offensive to his crowd of followers. Our Lord's choice – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” – is an obvious one. Taken from Moses' final instructions to the Hebrews in the Book of Deuteronomy, this commandment is enshrined in the Shema, one of the most important prayers in the Hebrew liturgy. Observant Jews recite the Shema twice daily, and it's the first prayer taught to Jewish children. Not even Caiaphas could object to Jesus's choice. But then, Jesus adds a commandment from the Book of Leviticus, words spoken by Adonai for Moses to repeat to the Hebrew people: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Suddenly, things have gotten more complicated.

Jesus doesn't suddenly spring a new commandment on his audience. Both halves of the Great Commandment are firmly rooted in the Law of Moses. But by combining them as he did, Jesus ties devotion to God with love for humanity, requiring the faithful to send love vertically to Heaven *and* horizontally across the community. As Reverend Chelsey Harmon observes, “God's laws for how we best exist and function in the world God has made truly do seem to fall along these two directional axes of love of God and love of neighbour.” It sounds straightforward but,

as is so often true of Jesus's teachings, putting it into practice is anything but. What does it mean to love our neighbor? What is Jesus really telling us to do?

This question is complicated by our modern tendency to understand love solely as a strong positive emotion. It's a word we sometimes overuse. We "love" chocolate, pizza, puppies, a favorite song, book, or movie. We love our children, our partners, our families, our friends. There's nothing wrong with those feelings – the world would be a poorer place without them. But, as Bible scholar Clayton Schmid observes, "biblical love is not passive and it is not strictly emotional." Jesus wants us to accept and return the active love that God showers upon us, and to share it with those around us. According to Schmid, biblical love is "active mercy. It is marked by patience and generosity, again, both acts generated by the one who loves. In short, loving is a choice, not a feeling." Professor John J. Collins agrees that the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves is action-oriented. It instructs us to affirmatively treat our neighbors justly and mercifully, the way we ourselves would want to be treated. We may not always like our neighbors, but Jesus wants us to do well by them, nonetheless.

So, what does this have to do with baptism? As our own Catechism explains, baptism "is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God." When we are baptized, we become someone entirely new. Theologian Scott Harrower puts it this way. In baptism, every Christian "receives a new loving and affirming identity from God." Baptism gives us a fresh start, an opportunity to break from our past mistakes and our flawed human selves so we can start learning how to love the way God would have us love ourselves, one another and him.

Still, we may wonder why innocent children need the fresh start that baptism provides. God certainly loves them already, and it's not as though they've had time to really mess up.

That's one reason why some theologians have argued over the centuries that baptism should be reserved for those who are old enough to need it and to choose it for themselves. However, that's a minority view. The Episcopal Church, among many, baptizes infants and small children so they can share citizenship in the New Covenant, membership in the Body of Christ, and redemption by God. Baptizing little ones brings them into the Christian family. And, I would add, it requires the adults among us to help them grow up in biblical love by showing them how it's done.

In baptism, we renounce evil, repent of our sins, and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Those of us who are already baptized pledge to do all in our power to support the newly baptized in their life in Christ. And, in case we're not certain how to do that, the liturgy invites us to renew our own baptismal covenant. That's a way of reminding ourselves and one another of exactly how we've promised to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves.

We need the reminder because obeying the Great Commandment is not an easy task, nor can we ever really claim to have finished the job. Well-intended Christians have taken baptismal vows for centuries, but that hasn't kept us from piling up a seemingly infinite number and variety of mistakes. Events both at home and abroad in the past week alone have proven just how heartbreaking and broken our world really is. It will take all the biblical love, mercy, and justice we can muster to even begin setting things right.

But Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, especially the children whom we baptize. That means we have to work, and keep working, for as long as it takes to rebuild our world on a foundation of biblical love. That means feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, tending the sick, and visiting the lonely. It means caring for Creation, so that our children and grandchildren inherit a livable planet. It means showing kindness and mercy to the people who need them. It means speaking out against injustice and enforcing justice, lovingly but firmly, on those who

forget their duty to love God and their neighbor. It also means allowing those folks to repent and return when their own better angels persuade them to do so. It isn't about fond feelings, though they're always nice to have. It's about recognizing that we owe it to our children to give them a world built on love. With God's help, we can begin to pay that debt.

There are some things that baptism doesn't do. It doesn't shield the children of God from the problems of the world. It doesn't keep us from making unfortunate choices. It doesn't guarantee that we'll stay with a particular denomination, or even continue to practice our faith throughout our lives. It doesn't protect us from fear, doubt, anger, or sorrow. It doesn't keep us from getting sick or from the end of our earthly lives. All of those things are part of the human condition, and we come through them by God's grace.

But baptism marks us as Christ's own, forever. Long after the holy water has dried and the consecrated oil has melted into our skin, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit. Baptism is an outward sign of the inward grace with which God blesses his children. It brings us into Jesus's ministry, allowing us to receive God's love and to share it with everyone we know.

The world is always changing. As a boy, my grandfather rode into town in a horse-drawn wagon. He lived to see astronauts walking on the moon, but I don't think he could have envisioned electric cars, iPhones, or nanotechnology. Theo and Arthur will grow up to live in a world that we can barely imagine, but it will have its challenges because the world always does. This morning, we prepare the boys to meet those challenges in the waters of baptism, bringing them into the Christian family forever. There's no better preparation or greater gift that we can give them. *Amen.*