

# The Two Commandments

[Matthew 22:34-40]

"On these two commandments hang the whole law and the prophets."

K Karpen, Sunday, October 23, 2005

Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost

[Matthew 22:34–40, “The Two Commandments,” K Karpen, October 23, 2005]

“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Matthew 22:34–40

I’m approaching this text and this topic with fear and trembling. To be honest, I’m tempted not to approach it at all. How do you talk about love in the way Jesus has in mind with the kind of integrity the topic demands? So I’m tempted *not* to attempt it! Part of me would love to just re-read the text and sit down before I say anything to dilute its power or compromise its radicalism.

Love. Nothing but love. Love God. Love God with everything you have, keeping nothing back. Love your neighbor as though your neighbor were you yourself. What a terrible and terrifying text! How dare we approach it with the blandness we do? How dare we pretend this is easy? How dare we pretend we live our lives like this; when the idea of living that way seems not only hopelessly unpleasant but downright impossible.

Love! To have nothing but love. Oh Jesus! If you’d asked us to do anything but that; anything but that. You know what that’s like! You know where that leads! “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The Methodist environmentalist Bill McKibben sums up the trouble with this phrase perfectly: “Although its rhetorical power has been dimmed by repetition, it is a radical notion, perhaps the most radical notion possible. Especially since Jesus, in all his teachings, made it very clear who the person you were supposed to love was: the poor person, the sick person, the naked person, the hungry person.”

That’s a problem. Last night a woman named Linda came by the house. She wanted a sandwich and a blanket; she mostly sleeps outside. I was so mad. Why was I so mad? I’m not sure.

I brought her something to eat, and I reluctantly parted with a couple of flannel sheets, feeling far from virtuous, knowing that if I really wanted to love her like I love myself, I could. If it were me, I’d have preferred the warm dry couch I walked past to bring her the stuff. I could have brought her into our home. And, God help me. I didn’t want to.

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. There are too many neighbors. It gets a little overwhelming. And a natural reaction is to do nothing. Pretend they’re not there. Pretend they’re not neighbors. Love your neighbor as yourself. Rare is the decision we make that conforms to that standard. It’s just too overwhelming.

[Matthew 22:34–40, "The Two Commandments," K Karpen, October 23, 2005]

The funny thing is, I think Jesus knows it. That's why, in replying to that poor benighted lawyer, he tells him to love God with everything he has: heart, soul, mind. Only then—only if you approach that way of loving God, can you hope to think of your neighbor as something other than a nearby annoyance. Only if we approach that all-absorbing way of loving God, will we start to see our neighbor as just another part of ourselves.

OK. So how do you love God? Same as you love anybody. You think about God. A lot you hang upon God's every word. You frequent the places God frequents. Not for nothing does the Bible speak of God as our lover.

Shlomo Carlebach was a rabbi, a hasid (a lover of God), and a musician. He lived and worked down the block from here. He once spoke to an interviewer about experiencing God's presence & love. He said, "Full experiences of God can never be planned or achieved. They are spontaneous acts of Grace, almost accidental." The interviewer asked him, then, why he worked so hard at spiritual practices and discipline, if it was all accidental. Carlebach replied, "To be as accident-prone as possible."

Since reading those words a few weeks back, I have been trying to do everything I can think of to be accident-prone, as accident-prone as possible. To be underfoot so God's grace trips over me. To be in the way of the Way. And it helps. All right; if it doesn't always help me love my neighbors, it sure makes me more aware of who my neighbors are.

I have a lot of neighbors, and so do you. Some people tell me they're my neighbors. I always know I'm in trouble when somebody calls up and says, "Rev. Karpen, you don't know me, but I'm a neighbor of yours." 90% of the time they are calling to complain about our homeless neighbors on the steps of the church. And they, too, I have been trying to see as something other than a nearby annoyance. Because, the truth is, as the song we've just sung says ("Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us With Your Love," Hymn 432), neighbors are rich, poor, black, white, near by, and far away.

I know that over the past week we have been pummeled with images of some of our far-away neighbors in Kashmir and other places. And I know that our Katrina-weary hearts are just yelling, Stop. We're done. No more. And Hurricane Wilma is bearing down on Florida. And who ever heard of a hurricane named Alpha? Seems to me all hurricanes are pretty alpha. What a cruel joke.

[Matthew 22:34-40, "The Two Commandments," K Karpen, October 23, 2005]

God, we can barely get through the day. We've got friends in the hospital, aging parents, ailing kids. What do you want us to do? And God says, "Nothing. Nothing but love."

