

October 26, 2014

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "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.'

When Jesus says there are just two Commandments to follow, he certainly zeroes in on the essentials, but in describing them, he does not fill in any of the details. Until the detail is filled in..I believe these commandments remain just hopeful ideals. The vital details we need to work out for ourselves, and sometimes in practice this occurs with fear and trembling.

Earlier this year, at the direction of Pope Francis, the Vatican released the list of priests defrocked over the last ten years. These were for the most part priests fired for child molestation and rape. There was also a larger list of priests given a lesser punishment, not so much because their crimes were less, but rather that they were so old and infirm that a lesser punishment was thought appropriate. But lest we Protestants look at this list thinking to ourselves, "Well that is the Catholic Church for you....we are so superior", Don't let us forget that undoubtedly all denominations and churches have their own embarrassments of this type, their own clerics and lay ministers who are hypocrites..... their own roll of shame.

It is remarkably easy to lose the main point of Christianity... and history is full of cases where sincere Church going believers have lost their way. Just think for a moment about some of the more dramatic.

Between 1200 and 1400 AD there were 13 Crusades where whole armies of those under the banner of the cross rode off with the intention of massacring those Muslims who controlled the Holy lands. On the way they sacked cities (including the odd Christian city that

had easy pickings) and boasted on their return of blood up to the horses' bridles.

We also have the persecution of Jews with the excuse that the Jews were responsible for killing Jesus and controlling the finances of the world.

The forced conversion of thousands to Christianity under some of the Roman Emperors, the burning of those suspected of being witches, the burning of those who translated Bibles into non Latin languages like English,

Catholics massacring Protestants and Protestants massacring Catholics. We have the Inquisition, the defense of slavery and God enlisted as a rallying point (often on both sides) of just about every major war in every century since the time of Christ.

Consider for example Hitler had his storm-troopers marching into battle with "God is with us" imprinted in German on their belt buckles and a US chaplain blessing the mission to drop an atomic bomb on a city in Japan.

These days you don't have to go too far before you hear indignant condemnation of ISIS for their public beheadings captured on video. Whether or not we are equally indignant about the innocent members of the public killed unintentionally every month by Drones operated by our allies may even reflect our own bigotry. Where is the consistency in our Christian moral indignation?

We find Christians on both sides wading in to argue moral issues like the acceptance of homosexuality, like the right to life, like abortion, like pacifism, like euthanasia and like genetic engineering, with each side claiming their beliefs to be in line with Christ's teachings.

At the same time as some have used Christianity as an excuse for self-advancement, we have self-sacrificing sincere Christians who set up schools and hospitals, who worked for justice for all, who freed the slaves, who worked for more humane conditions for widows, for orphans, for prisoners and for the handicapped. We have The Sandwich Board and the Holiday Baskets donated by our own Trinity Church.

With regard to Jesus teachings..... and I am speaking definitely not as a Rhodes Scholar... have we ever noticed that Jesus when he teaches seems particularly light in the theology department. Unlike the rule-bound Pharisees and Sadducees of his day who spent hours focusing on discussing slavish obedience to the law, in other words the 613 commandments found in what we now call the Old Testament, Jesus frankly doesn't seem to care about the detail of the law.

Also Jesus seems particularly easy going when it comes to heresy.

Quite frequently, Jesus deliberately flouted the laws. He healed on the Sabbath, spoke to Samaritans (including Samaritan women...what a shocker !!),and he cared for the despised in society including prostitutes and tax collectors. He even touched the lepers.

When it came to heresy, Jesus did most of his teaching by example. Those who followed different rules of sacrifice and even had an alternative temple – in other words the Samaritans – were also heretics – yet Jesus, as a Jew, could set aside those rules which identified the heretics and focus on basic response of love and compassion.

In modern days those who cling on to statements in Romans and elsewhere in the Bible about condemning homosexuality appear quite disappointed that Jesus does not even mention the topic. Although Jesus did have respect for religious tradition – and true he identified the important laws – he produced his perspective by focusing on the spirit not so much the wording of the laws.

The first and great commandment reminds us of the simple fact of life that the definition of “God is Love”. This love should come to dominate our thinking and provide the motivating dynamic for all our actions in our lives.

The second commandment.." loving your neighbor as yourself"  
It is almost as if Jesus is reminding us that the Love mentioned in the

first commandment will find its real meaning when we apply it to those around us. All those around us...not all excluding all political rebels Russians, all members of ISIS, Jews, Muslims, Immigrants, etc etc etc

In our recent trip to the UK, we heard many people complain there are so many foreigners they, the locals, don't feel it is their own country anymore. This is a new situation for communities and requires deliberate plans for positive action initiated by those who care.

Another change is perhaps more worrying. Rapid advances in technology have blurred the lines between what was considered the traditional lines of demarcation as to what humans could do and what they used to think God would have to do on their behalf. A few centuries ago if you got really sick, doctors could not help you. All you could do was pray.

These days if you get really sick, in many cases doctors not only can help – they can even keep you artificially alive in the hospital. But sometimes the drugs to keep people alive are very expensive and those like the rest of us have to decide if the drugs should be available. We often no longer need to pray to God to keep Grandma alive. Now more often, the family has to make what was previously thought to be a God type decision about whether or not Grandma should be resuscitated.

A few centuries ago what was grown locally was all you ate. Food sent a long distance would spoil so if the local food ran out you starved and all you could do was to pray. Since surplus food can now be grown in places like this country and shipped long distance if a community is starving in some distant country – it is not God who we must appeal to get them fed. It is we who now have to make the sometimes literally costly decision about whether or not to save them. Loving your neighbor takes on a continually new meaning in a continually changing world.

Should a ninety year old Grandpa get a kidney transplant? Should 12 year-old pregnant Jane have an abortion? Should genetically engineered crops be used to feed the hungry? Should the

overstaying illegal immigrant be sent home to a grim future? If we find that a group of Muslims are being discriminated against in a workplace, whose responsibility is it to get action?

These decisions cannot be taken lightly – but if loving your neighbor has any meaning at all, then genuine decisions to meet the reality of changing situations must be made.

Our Lord set the general framework in clear and concise words..it is up to us, individually, to add the detail.....Amen.