

The Church Turned Upside Down

Peter JB Carman

Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady New York

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Leviticus 19:1-2; 15-19

Matthew 22:34-46

I.

A lawyer asked a seemingly simple question to test Jesus. The seemingly simple answer that Jesus provided remains as important today as it was then.

The question the lawyer asked Jesus was this: “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

Jesus’ answer began with an ancient call to the people of Israel, a call to embrace their God with all they had and all they were...”You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” And then, in line with the teaching of another rabbi of about the same era, and a little later, Rabbi Akiva, as well as with the earlier teaching of that great gentle rabbi, Hillel, Jesus quoted the second half of Leviticus 19:18! “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In a sense this was nothing new. Jesus cited ancient scripture to answer the question, two passages that were widely seen as essential Jewish teachings from the Torah or Instruction of God. If we read Leviticus 19, we can see why. Jewish teachings had a deep concern for the quality of the relationship of the people with God—and the quality of their relationship with each other, and the rest of humankind.

It may not have been new to the rabbis: but it remains new to most of us to this day! If we take it to heart! For love can become the lens through which everything else can be seen in a new way.

Generations of Christians were taught, incorrectly, that Jewish teachers of the time of Jesus hadn’t grasped that faith was about Love at all. Certainly that society had many people who got carried away with petty concerns and wooden rules, as ours has, at the expense of the most basic thing! Yet the profound teachers of that time agreed with Jesus’ response to the lawyer. As Jesus did, they turned to the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and found there, interpreting a thousand principles and regulations, the same deep wisdom. Love of God and love of neighbor were the source from which all the rest of the Law flowed.

There is a deep unity in the most basic teachings of Jesus and the essence of Jewish teaching at its best in his own day! Two great commandments: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

II.

Just because the Rabbi Jesus and the Rabbi Akiva and the Rabbi Hillel taught similar things about what the essence of God's intention for humanity was, doesn't mean a whole lot of people were listening. Or that those who were listening—then or now—really got what they were saying. What was radical about the teaching of Jesus was not that it was new, nor that it was unique. It was rather that it went to the root of what living well, living faithfully, is about. It is one thing to say it—but another to live it.

On this day, Reformation Sunday, we remember and honor the Protestant reformers of the 1500s and after. They too were trying to turn the Church upside down! Both Luther and Calvin, for example, taught that our salvation depends on God's grace, not on getting the rules right for getting into heaven! But even the great reformers in practice forgot that Love was at the heart of Jesus' teachings—as they moved rapidly to try to impose their own orthodoxy, their own sense of the right rules, often at the expense of human lives.

How amazing it would be if we were to follow the teaching of the rabbis long ago. It would not only turn our lives inside out, it would turn the Church upside down.

But where do we begin? Many of us have trouble even loving ourselves, let alone having a love affair with God or our neighbor. How can we love anyone else if we cannot love ourselves? How can we truly love ourselves if we cannot love and experience the love of God? How can we love God and then act heedless of those around us who are God's children? The three are a braided cord, intertwined! And yet most of us have trouble loving all three, God, our neighbors and ourselves. And sometimes the cord frays or snaps.

Lynn, my wife, shares a story of being at a church meeting some time ago. It was one of those meetings that got pretty heated: one member started getting really upset. When he got up to speak he went on very passionately for quite some time. Finally he shouted: "I love God better than all of you!" and stormed out. It would be easy to make fun of him! But who cannot confess, sometime or another, to feeling that way?

Or on a very different note: a young woman shared with me she was having trouble keeping her own sense of who she was clear from the identity of her boyfriend. "When I am with him I lose track of who I am," she told me. She started to act in ways that she didn't feel comfortable with. She started to lose her sense of who she was and where she was going. In order to have a healthy relationship she first needed to get clear about who she was. In order to be able to love him, or have a life at all, she had to learn to love herself.

Jesus didn't say to the lawyer, "Don't love yourself." The love of neighbor and the love of self are intertwined. And this is particularly true in those hard moments when, yes, the follower of Jesus must decide to make a great sacrifice. It is particularly true when we are trying to be the body of Christ in community, too.

Great lovers don't always get rewarded! Love, after all, doesn't rise too high on the food chain of values in our day, in terms of what we are to be after. We get bombarded from our

various screens by images of power, of material success, of cultural cool. Basically, other things crowd out Love. For some of us it is working hard. For others it is about meeting expectations. And we are taught to mistrust love. After all, it just doesn't sound that practical! And won't it make us rather vulnerable? How are we supposed to be strong that way? Love is tough to live by.

The idea of rooting our whole lives in the adventure of love-- how I relate to you and we relate to God, and by extension to the universe around us--- that's still just about as rare as back in the days of Jesus and Akiva and Hillel. To try to live that way is as basic a re-start for us now as it would have been two thousand years ago. And the outcomes can be as revolutionary.

If Church communities were to try this out, fully, it would make a big difference in little things: like how we speak to each other, how truth and compassion embrace in our dealings within the Church! Oh and it would create communities that reached out to neighbors with a revolutionary openness. And it would create communities willing to take risks for their neighbors, speak out for justice and peace, make sacrifices, focus on quality of interactions and the sacredness of conscience.

III

For two thousand years, a few people have in fact actually dared to live their lives as an experiment in the power of Love. In every era they have existed, not only rare individuals, but little communities together, trying to live a different way. In the late middle ages, you could find them in Europe. While the whole world was divided between rich and poor, given to bloodbaths and war, these little groups called Anabaptists started to proclaim Love—were seized by a vision of a world in which people would not kill each other anymore. For them love of God and loving one another and loving their neighbors meant no more swords. Some of them even gave up private property and practiced what they called the community of goods. Many of them were killed—and they never had too much power in the society overall. But they had an enormous impact, far beyond their numbers.

All through history, most of the people who tried to live the basic Love teaching of Jesus have gotten little or no publicity. But we find them in extraordinary places. A missionary here trying to live with those who have leprosy, knowing he might well contract the disease. A woman there willing to start a community to minister with the dying. An activist over here willing to be made fun of while working for change in the prison system, or an end to a particular war, or for civil rights. Or it might just be the two middle-aged factory workers, a couple I once visited in Wallingford, Connecticut—whose lives to all outside viewers might seem utterly normal. But they had made a quiet commitment to live Love, before success, before power, before wealth, before consumerism. So their lives would go on, not known to many—but lives that somehow salt the world they live in, salt it with hope, salt it with peace.

No one can say it is easy! If we have rarely received Love, for example, it is hard to know how to give it. And we may not get much encouragement from those around us for trying to base our life on an invisible reality. Yet we are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses. Once we decide to attempt this path of Love, we discover people we had never seen before right

nearby. We start to learn from them. We find these others who share a common vision of living as Children of Love, people who are willing to put what they have, who they are, where they are going on the line for the sake of Love.

May God move in us this day—to embrace this walk, hard as it is, knowing that God can help make happen what human beings sometimes fear. And then let the transformation happen. Let our lives be renewed: let the Church turn upside down. Let us love. From this proceeds everything else. And nothing is the same any more.