

Gladdening Light 2020

The Religion of the Neighbor

Mark 12:28-34

Matthew 22:34-40

Luke 10:25-28

Mark was the first to record the Great Commandment, which had been circulating for close to thirty years by the time he wrote it down. You can tell it was first from the Jewishness of Jesus' answer, which comes straight from Torah. He begins with the Shema, the central confession of faith from the book of Deuteronomy, and ends with a verse from Leviticus. He lengthens the Shema, which commands Israel to love the one God with "all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might," by adding "and with all your mind," for which college teachers of religion have thanked him forty million times ("*Jesus said to use your mind!*"). Then he adds the fragment from Leviticus about loving the neighbor as the self. Even with Jesus' edits, Mark says, the scribe likes the answer very much.

In Matthew's version, the admiring scribe has become a contentious lawyer, who wants to put Jesus to the test. Though sacred debate was commonplace in Jesus' day, you can already tell Matthew has heard a different version of the story, or is telling it his own way to a different kind of congregation. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" the lawyer asks Jesus, whose answer is shorter this time. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," Jesus says. "This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Maybe you can hear the footwork in the answer his time. The lawyer asks for one commandment. Jesus gives him two. The lawyer wants to set the terms of the engagement. Jesus uses the lawyer's momentum and gives it a spin. *You want to know which commandment is the greatest? I'll give you two.* Jesus knows aikido. He carries the lawyer's pack another mile.

"Hear, O Israel," has vanished from Jesus' answer, which may be why so many Christians think he is the author of the Great Commandment. He is not. He just takes two pieces of scripture from two different books of the Hebrew Bible and puts them together in his own way. He shows later Christians how to proof-text.

In Luke's version—the one written by a Gentile for other Gentiles—Jesus does not say the Great Commandment at all. A *lawyer* says it, after Jesus has followed good rabbinic form by answering a question with a question. "Teacher," the lawyer asks him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

It would be a mistake to think that you know what the lawyer is asking here, since he has never been to a revival in the Bible Belt or even read the gospel in which he is right this moment appearing. All we can really gather from his question to Jesus is that he wants to know what God wants from him. He wants Jesus to boil all of the divine teachings down into a do-able pellet that will allow him to live in God's presence forever. But Jesus passes on his chance to

evangelize the lawyer. He is more interested in what the man thinks than in what he thinks. Jesus really is a teacher.

“What is written in the law?” Jesus asks the lawyer. “What do you read there?” Then it’s the *lawyer* who says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Not only is the Shema gone—how many Gentiles would recognize the reference anyway? So are the references to first and second commandments. In Luke’s lawyer’s summary of the law, the only thing between love of God and love of neighbor is the conjunction “and.”

Since Jesus can’t remember what he said in Mark’s gospel, he likes the lawyer’s answer very much. Still, he knows that knowing something isn’t the same as doing it. “You have given the right answer,” he says to the man who wants to live in God’s presence forever. “*Do* this, and you will live.”

These differences between the gospels are important, if only because they track the increasing distance between the religion *of* Jesus and the religion *about* him. At the same time, they *decrease* the distance between love of God and love of neighbor, until—in Luke’s gospel—these are not two loves distilled from two separate teachings but one love summed up in a single verse. This underlies another teaching that comes up later in the New Testament in a letter from John: “Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20 NRSV). Any questions?

*

It was the first day of the new semester at Piedmont College. Religion 101: Religions of the World was full. It was always full, either because word had gotten out that I was an easy grader or because students had heard about the extra credit field trips to worship centers in Atlanta, with free meals afterwards at places like Café Bombay, Ameer’s Mediterranean Grill, or the Golden Buddha. At least that was the buzz. Since I read lots of student papers, I knew students were also there because they wanted to know the truth about God, and were confounded by all the choices.

Most had been raised Christian, just like their parents had, but unlike their parents, they had gone to school with kids from Laos, Mexico, Bosnia, and Sierra Leone. They had been to soccer matches where people cheered in a lot of different languages, and hurled insults in them too. The students drove past shopping centers with hallal butchers, saree shops, kosher delicatessens, and kente cloth stores. They saw large temples and masjids go up in their old neighborhoods. They had smartphones that connected them to people who had never seen the inside of a church and didn’t want to. What were they to make of this and where could they find out more? Probably not at church.

Some arrived at college with a high school course in world religions on their transcripts, eager to take another. Others just knew they had to take one course in religion or philosophy to

graduate and were practicing *wei wu wei*, which Rabbi Rami talked about yesterday: the Taoist way of least resistance. However they landed in class that first day, I was glad to see them, though full disclosure meant laying out the problems right at the start.

First, there was no way to cover five of the world's great religions in fifteen weeks, which meant the students were going to get just enough information to make them dangerous but not enough to make them wise. Second, they were never going to be able to unlearn what they were about to learn, so they needed to think hard about whether they were secure enough in their faith or atheism to cope with an ideological landslide. Third, it wasn't true that all religions are alike. They are as different as one God and no capital G God at all, as different as eternal soul and no enduring soul.

I asked for a show of hands. "How many of you have eaten frog's legs, gator tails, or rabbit?" Since we were in the South, I knew a few would raise their hands and they did.

"How did you get talked into trying it for the first time?" I asked.

"Tastes like chicken?" a girl on the front row said.

Religions aren't foods, but most of us disarm what we don't know by comparing it with what we do. When you're studying the religions of the world, it's as important to let the familiar things be familiar as it is to let the strange things stay strange. Otherwise it will all end up being about you.

Finally, I told the students it wasn't true that religions had nothing in common, so only one of them could be right. They have a lot in common, not least of which is that they are all fingers pointing to the moon. As much as they may like to think they're arguing about the moon, what they're really arguing about is who has the best finger. This is a terrible shame when it's the pointing that's so lovely: at the luminous, the numinous, the light that shines on each and all, casting the same reflection in every eye, though never exactly the same one two nights in a row.

That was about it on the first day of class, except for the bookmarks I handed out, with some version of the Golden Rule on it from a dozen of the world's great traditions.

"Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself." That's from the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

"This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you." That's from the Mahabharata, a classic of Hindu literature.

"We are as much alive as we keep the world alive." That's from Chief Dan George of the (Slay-wah tuth) Tsleil-Waututh nation.

Jesus said it too, in the Sermon on the Mount. "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

It's not the Great Commandment, but it's right next-door, and like the Great Commandment it does an odd thing for anyone who thinks the sacred is *up there*. It takes the finger pointing to the moon and turns it to point at something much closer—a neighbor, a stranger, a grey whale, a Japanese bush warbler—then bends it again to point to the self's own heart. *This is that. Thou art that. Near or far, coming or going, it is all one love, one love, one love.*

I chose the Great Commandment for this morning's worship service because it's what keeps me Christian—a polyamorous one, as Mirabai said, with a big red P on my shirt—only I wear that as a team jersey and not a garment of shame, because Jesus never commanded me to love my religion. He commanded me to love God and my neighbor, which I take to mean every living thing that shares the address “Earth.” Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Aunt Water and Uncle Fire, Grandma Life and Grandpa Death. Jesus taught me that when my religion comes between and my neighbor, I should choose my neighbor. He taught me that his way is the way open to all ways.

I know we don't all agree on this. That's why Jesus keeps pointing us to each other, so we can get over ourselves, a little or a lot; so we can take a Sabbath from imposing our will on each other, from thinking we own the moon. When religions transcend themselves, it's not by going *up* but by coming *down*, into the humus that is what we have most in common. The gold dust comes to birth with the quartz sand all around it.¹

*

A little earlier in this service we read the work of Howard Thurman responsively, in his gorgeous channeling of Psalm 139. For those of you who may not know his name yet, he was an early twentieth century mystic, the contemplative grandfather of the American Civil Rights Movement, author of twenty books including *Jesus and the Disinherited*, co-founder of the first intentionally interracial and interreligious fellowship in the United States, and the first African American Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston College, a post he held from 1953-1965, and where he taught a young rabbi named Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, who later became a founder of the Jewish Renewal movement in America.

Much earlier than that, in 1936, Thurman and his wife Sue Bailey traveled to India with Benjamin and Sadie Mays to meet Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and other leaders of the independence movement there. A man named Augustine Ralla Rama, general secretary of the Indian Student Christian Movement at the time, had argued for inviting what he called a “Negro” delegation. Since Christianity in India was the “oppressors’ religion,” he said, “there would be a unique value in having representatives of another oppressed group speak on the validity and contribution of Christianity.”²

Something happened to Thurman while he was in India that he never forgot, though it took him many years to write about it. It was the day he had set aside to meet with a university professor named Dr. Singh, head of the division of Oriental studies.

¹ William James, in *The Pluralistic Universe*.

² Walter Fluker, “How Howard Thurman met Gandhi and Brought Nonviolence to the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Conversation* (January 31, 2019), accessed February 8, 2020. <http://theconversation.com/how-howard-thurman-met-gandhi-and-brought-nonviolence-to-the-civil-rights-movement-110148>

One glorious morning we sat on the floor in searching conversation about the life of the spirit, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. When lunchtime came, I had to keep an appointment with some students. Getting up from the floor, massaging my usual charley horse, I looked at him.

He remarked: "I see you are chuckling."

I replied that he was doing the same. "Perhaps we are reacting to the same thing," I said.

"Suppose you tell me first," he remarked.

I said we had spent the entire morning sparring for position—"you from behind your Hindu breastwork, and I from behind my Christian embattlement. Now and then, we step out from that protection, draw a bead on each other, then retreat."

"You are right. When we come back this afternoon, let us be wiser than that."

That afternoon I had the most primary, naked fusing of total religious experience with another human being of which I have even been capable. It was as if we had stepped out of social, political, cultural frames of reference, and allowed two human spirits to unite on a ground of reality that was unmarked by separateness and differences. This was a watershed of experience in my life. We had become a part of each other even as we remained essentially individual. I was able to stand secure in my place and enter into his place without diminishing myself or threatening him.³

Say I am you.

Thou art that.

It doesn't taste like chicken.

One love, one love, one love.

If our religions cannot help us get there, I think we're allowed to complain—and then to become the change we want to see—turning from the moon to face the neighbor who is God's face for us today, and looking back from that same face with the only love there is.

©Barbara Brown Taylor

February 9, 2020

³ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1979), 129.