

Love Is ...

Leviticus 9:9-18

Introduction

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” The lawyer in today’s Gospel lesson knew the Law but had questions about interpretation. “I know I am to love my neighbor; who is my neighbor?” This isn’t surprising. In **chapter 9** of **Leviticus**, where this Law is found, Moses seems to use “neighbor” and “brother” interchangeably. This would indicate that the neighbor is any other Israelite. Jesus takes this exclusive view and turns it on its ear, making it inclusive. His definition of “neighbor” is anyone around you. Specifically, anyone you meet who is in need. A neighbor is one who helps another with their need. Because our society is so far removed from the Law, the part we have trouble understanding is the definition of love. What does the world say about love, beside that it’s a many splendored thing? (Read “What the World Says About Love”). If we look at our Old Testament reading, we can get a comprehensive picture of what love really is.

Love Is ...

Our reading can be divided into five sayings that end with the phrase “I am the Lord.” Each one of these tells us something about what love is. Love isn’t an emotion or a feeling. It isn’t caring for or “being nice” to someone. Love is a whole array of attitudes and actions which focus on the betterment of other people.

Generosity (v. 9-10)

The first two verses tell us to share with those in need, the poor, and the sojourner. That would be an alien or foreigner living within your borders. The directive here is to farmers. God is saying, “You have plenty to eat; you don’t have to hog it all for yourself. Share with those in need.” We express love toward others when we are generous to them and give them what they need. Just as God showed His love for us by generously sending His Son to the cross to die in our place. One thing we have that everyone needs is God’s Word. No act of generosity is ever complete until we also share God’s Word with whomever we are helping.

Honesty (v. 11-12)

In the next couplet, God lumps stealing in with lying and misusing His name. What do these all have in common? In each of these cases, one is dealing falsely, or being dishonest. This command says that love is the opposite of that; it is honesty. It is showing love to others when we are honest with them, especially when the truth hurts.

Fairness (v. 13-14)

The next two verses talk about oppressing people or taking advantage of them. Some in the world like to divide everyone up into two groups, the oppressed and the oppressors. They assume that whoever has power uses it to his or her advantage and to the disadvantage of others. That’s because people see themselves in others. They know that’s how they would act. Power is not the issue. Employers do have power over their employees. Those who are sound have an advantage over the

disabled. The command is to not take advantage of that power. Love is fairness. There are always those below us on any scale. How do we treat them? Do we show God's love by being fair with them?

Justice (15-16)

While fairness is loved expressed toward those who are weaker or of lower state than we are, justice is what love looks like in dealing with all people. **Verse 15** says we are *not to be partial to the poor or defer to the great*. The world often thinks applying justice is a mean thing. Justice isn't about being mean or hateful. It is about what's right and wrong, what God says is right and wrong. Love applies justice evenly to all people. God doesn't have different moral standards for different people.

Forgiveness (17-18)

But love does not apply justice vindictively or judgmentally. Justice is tempered with mercy. *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge (v. 18a)*. Punishment is directed toward the action. Mercy is directed toward the actor. Love is, above all, forgiveness. *We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19)*. So, we pray, *Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*. God shows us the ultimate love, the ultimate forgiveness by forgiving our sins through the death of His Son on the cross. We can only love others, show them forgiveness because He has first loved us, shown us forgiveness.

Means of Grace

He does this whenever we receive the Sacrament of the Altar. He forgives our sins and strengthens our faith, making us able to be generous, honest, fair, just, and forgiving, to fulfill the Law of **LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF**.

*And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
