

Sermon for October 26, 2014 (Proper 25, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 2:3-12; Psalm 1; Matthew 22:34-46

Title: Become What You Are

“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” (Matthew 22:37-39).

Have any of you ever had a neighbor who was really, really difficult to love?

Yes? Some of you?

I don’t think I have ever told you about our neighbor in New Jersey who absolutely hated me and my family – and for no reason that made any sense.

Everyone on the street calls him Uncle David. As far as I can tell, he has no family around, so I have no idea how he came by the title of Uncle. He lives all alone just four houses down from our old house, and he is VERY odd.

One summer night, when the kids were young and Angus was 10, Erin and I were frantically trying to get the kids to sit down at the dinner table all together.

Do you know how frustrating it is sometimes to get everyone together at the same time to eat when the food is hot, but the kids are all running around playing with friends?

Angus was down the street playing at the house next to Uncle David’s. After calling to him over and over again to come home for dinner, to no avail, I marched down there in exasperation to drag him home.

Erin and the girls were already sitting at the table waiting for us!

When I finally collected him and we turned to go back home, I heard a sharp whistle behind me. I turned around to see Uncle David in his front yard looking right at me and going like this (gesturing for me to come over to him!).

Until that point, he and I had never spoken. He keeps to himself entirely.

So I thought, “What! Are you kidding me? Am I some kind of dog that you whistle for and to whom you bark out commands? Forget it! We’re going home to eat dinner! If Uncle David has something important to say to me, he knows where I live! It’s right there!”

I was thinking this while all I did was wave to him and march Angus back home.

Little did I know that right then I sealed my fate!

My refusal to obey his whistle and finger command was all he needed to write me off forever. He has never forgiven me for that.

Twice every single day, Uncle David walked his dogs by our house, and even though Erin and I always said “good morning” and “hello” to him, he always ignored us completely.

Never once could he ever be bothered to respond or even just to look at us!

Not even to Fiona when she was just a cute little girl skipping down the sidewalk!

For years, Uncle David was this ongoing, inexplicable enigma to us – why he seemed to hate all of us so deeply.

So, one October day, Erin was walking by his house on the sidewalk and David was on his front porch putting up Halloween decorations. Very odd behavior for a recluse who never answered his doorbell on Halloween!

But there he was, Erin decided to make a good-neighborly comment: “Oh David, I like your decorations.” You know, she was trying one again to reach out to him, to be kind and neighborly.

No response at all. Not even a glance in her direction!

So, being the stubborn Irish woman that she is, she stopped and asked him, “David, is there someone that I’ve done to offend you?”

(Well, that right there was the big mistake, if you ask me! I mean, do you really want to know what he is thinking? I’m not so sure.)

Lo and behold, David slowly turned and said to her, “Your husband is rude and your family is too flamboyant. I’m a quiet guy. You are too flamboyant and I don’t want anything to do with you.” And he turned away and in 8 years of living on his block, that was the last thing he ever said to us.

Now, I’ve been called a lot of things in my life. But, flamboyant?!

Wow, I actually think that might be a compliment!

“And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’”.

Can I be honest with you? I have no idea how I could possibly love someone like that neighbor in the same way that I love myself.

When the Lord responded to this test about the greatest commandment in the Torah – the law of Moses, he responded by quoting the Shema – which was then and has been for 3000 years the basic statement of faith for all Jews everywhere.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

BUT then he adds the most amazing addition to it, the most radical amendment of all. This other bit, he says, is just like this: Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Love of God, neighbor, self – all together, as one integrated response to the goodness of God.

Do you want to know what God is looking for in the world and in your life? Here it is. Plain and simple.

But I’ll be the first to admit that I’m not very good at it. I do not love others in the same way that I care for, and tend to, my own personal needs.

I’m not even sure how this is possible. But I know that I want to. I know that this is who I want to be and what I want my life to stand for.

Most of the past week, I was befuddled by this question of how ordinary people like you and me can actually love in this way – until I came upon the insights of a famous Jesuit teacher.

In one of his books, **Anthony De Mello** invites us to consider the call to love by observing the reality of the world around us (The Way to Love by Anthony De Mello, Doubleday, 1992: p.77-80).

Listen what he wrote: “Observe how helplessly and indiscriminately a tree gives its shade to everyone, good and bad, young and old, high and low; to animals and humans and every living creature – even to the one who seeks to cut it down. Contemplate the sheer goodness of the tree, for there you have an image of what love is all about.” (Ibid, p.77-78).

Can you picture this, my friends?

The tree just is, and it generously shares its gift of shade with everyone who comes near to it.

Can you see how this love of God, neighbor, self is just like this?

Make no mistake about it: this love is the goal of our lives.

But we cannot force ourselves to become something that we are not, no more than the tree has to force itself to give shade to those who come near.

If you try to "KEEP" or "OBEY" these commandments to love, I promise that you will fail miserably.

This journey into love is not about trying harder, not about following the rules.

This journey with the Lord Jesus takes us from this place of “just-trying-to-muddle-through” to THAT place of loving God, neighbor and self only when we lose ourselves in God.

My friends, we lose ourselves in God...

When we accept God for who God is, not who we want God to be.

When we accept our neighbor, the one near us - in front of us at any moment, for who they are, not who we want them to be.

When we accept ourselves for who we are, not who we want ourselves to be.

We lose ourselves in God when we let go of our need to control, our need to judge, our need to coerce.

The tree just is, and it makes no judgment about who is worthy to enjoy its shade.

Love just is, and when we learn to be in God who we are created to be, then we stand firm like a tree, sharing generously with all who come near.

Listen to how the great Christian philosopher, Dallas Willard, expressed this: “In its deepest nature and meaning, our universe is a community of boundless and totally competent love” (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p.11). (REPEAT)

My friends, we lose ourselves in God when we accept the truth that, no matter how things may appear, love is at the heart of all things, for God is love.

I wish that I could tell you exactly what it means to love God, neighbor, self.

I wish that I could give you an easy step-by-step plan to love difficult people like Uncle David, to love the unsavory characters of the world.

But that would be simply one more exercise in coercion.

And love cannot be coerced. Love is always the fruit of freedom.

Here's the crucial question:

Will you allow yourself the freedom to love God, to love your neighbor, to love yourself – the freedom to BE who you are created to be?

Here is the pathway to the life of mutual love for which you were created:

Become what you are.

May it be so. Amen.