

TEXT: Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:34-40
THEME: Love your neighbor as yourself
SUBJECT: Love
TITLE: You Become a Place Where God Happens

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
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Messiah Moravian
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About 2600 years ago, the priests of Israel (in the reading from Leviticus) reiterated the words Moses received from God about 800 years earlier: “You shall love your neighbor *as* yourself.” 2000 years ago, some 1400 years after Moses, Jesus tells the priests: “You shall love your neighbor *as* yourself.” Jesus does not make up the command to love God and neighbor; Jesus quotes Moses.

Just a few years ago, Studs Terkel, collector of people’s stories, recorder of oral history, was told by an interviewee: “We need schools that tell us to love life and above all love yourself. Because you can’t love anybody else if you hate yourself. I think that is where racism comes from—hating yourself. You hate yourself so desperately that you grab onto something else to hate.”

I wonder if we will ever get the connection between ourselves and our neighbors?

For the hundredth anniversary of Thomas Merton’s birth, the Center for Interfaith Relations published reflections in his honor. The title of the book: *We Are Already One*, is taken from *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. Merton wrote this journal in the last days of his life as he traveled through Asia, meeting the Dali Lama and participating in a conference of nuns and monks from other religious traditions.

Merton wrote: “The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words. It is beyond speech. It is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity, but we discover an old unity. My dear brothers and sisters, we are already one. But we imagine we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be, is what we are.”

The hope offered by the contemplative way of life, Merton believed, is that whether or not we understand it, God loves us, is present in us, calls us, saves us *as* we risk sharing ourselves with the lonely other who seeks God through us. In this communion with the neighbor we truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations. It is the intimate union, in the depths of your own heart, of God’s spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and God are in all truth One Spirit.

Merton believed every single person he ever knew became a “word” for his instruction and guidance and for his formation. He matured to realize he was not a self-made man and no one gets born into his/her truest destiny alone. My destiny and those of my neighbor are interdependent; we are co-created together to become more deeply integrated human beings.

In the contemplative tradition in Christianity, as well as in other religions, this means seeing the world as a whole, seamlessly interwoven, dynamic, coherent, radiant, precious, creative, and compassionate; knowing yourself as belonging to and suffused in this oneness. (Cynthia Bourgeault)

Awakening to the reality that you and God are in truth One Spirit happens only in relation to the neighbor. This connection between our relationship with God and with our neighbor is the recurrent theme of scripture. We find the culmination of this theme in what we know as Jesus' High Priestly prayer recorded in John 17. Jesus prays "That all may be one, *just as* you, Father, are in me and I in you, that *they* too might be in us . . ." We are only "in" God in relation with others!

AS. Two little letters upon which hang all the law and the prophets. We take a brief review of the significance of *as* in the Gospel of Matthew. In a dream Joseph was told to take Mary *as* his wife, for the child conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit. Joseph woke up and did *as* the angel of the Lord commanded him. Joseph took Mary *as* his wife, not because he desired her, not because she was his soul mate, but *as* an act of obedience to the angel's command. By taking Mary *as* his wife Joseph fulfills the law of love.

Jesus commands the disciples to be perfect *as* your heavenly Father is perfect. He commands them not to give alms in order to be praised *as* the hypocrites do. He commands them not to pray by heaping up empty phrases *as* the Gentiles do, but to pray for God's will to be done on earth *as* it is in heaven. When they fast they are not to look dismal *as* the hypocrites do.

In everything the disciples are to do to others *as* they would like to be treated. In the parable of the unforgiving servant, the question is posed: Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, *as* I had mercy on you? Remember how we are to pray: "Forgive us our sins *as* we forgive those who sin against us."

Just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, you also *must* serve. The command to love our neighbors *as* ourselves, to serve our neighbors *just as* Jesus served, rescues us from slavery to our feelings, our prejudices, our preferences, our tribe, our own wills. For Jesus, love is an act of obedience to a larger claim upon me and my life than any claim of nation, race, family, friends, or even self-interests. That is why he can, ridiculously, command us to love our enemies.

Here is the cold hard truth that we attempt to evade with our preference for "heart religion," for a sentimental piety which accents the individual's relationship with Jesus/God: relation with eternal truth and love simply doesn't happen without mending our relations with Aaliyah, Alisha, and José. The actual substance of our relation with eternal truth and love is bound up with how we live with and for one another.

John the Dwarf, a 4th century Egyptian saint, said: "You don't build a house by starting with the roof and working down. You start with the foundation." He was asked, "What does this mean?"

He said, “The foundation is our neighbor whom we must win. The neighbor is where we start. Every commandment of Christ depends on this.”

St Anthony, a 3rd century Egyptian saint, put it this way: gaining the neighbor and winning God are linked. It is not getting them signed up to something or getting them on your side. It is opening doors for them to healing and to wholeness. Insofar as you open such doors for another, you gain God, in the sense that you become a place where God happens for somebody else. *You become a place where God happens.*

God comes to life for somebody else in a life-giving way, not because you are good or wonderful, but because that is what God has done. So, if we can shift our preoccupations, anxiety, and selfishness out of the way to put someone in touch with the possibility of God’s healing, to that extent we are ourselves in touch with God’s healing. So, if you gain your neighbor, not to speak of your enemy, you gain God. (Rowan Williams)

PRAYER: Richard Rolle of Hampole (1300-1349) Bible translator, hermit, religious writer.

Love, moreover,
does not suffer
the loving soul
to continue apart,
exiled inside itself.

Rather, love carries
that soul beyond
itself and nearer
the Beloved,
so that the soul
would rather
be there, joined
to that it loves,
than where the body
(which depends
on it for feeling
and for life) languishes.