



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

THE FIFTEENTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST

SEPTEMBER 10, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Well, here is today's good news. Jesus and Paul and I agree. And even the Beatles or, more specifically John Lennon. And what is it we all agree on?

Jesus said:

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." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."¹

Paul says in similar vein – and it's always wise to agree with Jesus –:

The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."²

And it ought go without saying that I agree – that we all here would be inclined to agree, with Jesus and Paul. And, perhaps, we have figured out that if there were one sermon in my repertoire, this would it. Jesus came not to discredit the Law, but to fulfill it, to call it back to its source, and that, of course, is love.

Popular culture got on the band wagon, so to speak, when John Lennon wrote and the Beatles performed what became an "iconic hippie anthem" with Keith Moon, Donovan, and Mick Jagger singing backup, track 11 on their Magical Mystery Tour album, but released first as a single, called...unless we have been living under a rock since 1966, we know it was and is "All You Need is Love." "All you need is love." Love is all you need.

The great second century theologian and Church father Origen described love as a debt that we pay every day and yet never can be satisfied. To which Paul would add that if we pay that debt every day, then we will keep all the commandments:

¹ Matthew 22:37-40 (NRSV).

² Romans 13:9 (NRSV).

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.³

Indeed, if the love of God and neighbor is rooted deeply in our hearts and commands every moment of our lives, then we need no other law.

All we need is love. It's just that easy...and that complicated. It is easy in one way because as Paul observes all the commandments are just particular understandings of what it means to love our neighbors. Thus, loving our neighbor means we do not, for example, murder them or steal from them, or even testify falsely against them in court, or begrudge them their privilege, preeminence, or blessings in life. But it also means, and this is where it can be complicated because, as Jesus said, the Law hangs on love of God and love of neighbor.

When the Law is inadequate to engender love, when application of the Law would result in injustice, for example, then the Law must give way to love. The classic example is the grocery store employee who is denied his or her wages, or even a legal or fair wage. And steals a loaf of bread or a quart of milk to feed his or her starving family. Where, as here, the Law against stealing is helpless to achieve justice, the interpretation or application that reflects love of neighbor must prevail. Needless to say, this concept applies only in the most exceptional circumstances "on account of its potency for havoc in the hands of the ignorant or unscrupulous."⁴

Now forgive me for digressing to mention purple cows and waiver wine, which was far from sacramental, at least in the traditional sense. But even federal jurisprudence recognizes that exceptions can be made to many rules, or their requirements waived, in appropriate circumstances and that the failure of an agency to make an exception or grant a waiver in itself can be considered arbitrary, capricious, or contrary to law, which in our little fish pond of communications law, was the overarching command of the "public interest."⁵ One always wanted to show their exception was so exceptional it would never occur again, that it was the proverbial purple cow.⁶

³ Romans 13:8 (NRSV).

⁴ John H. Stapleton, "Occult Compensation," Catholic Answers, <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/occult-compensation> (accessed September 4, 2023).

⁵ Melody Music, Inc. v. Federal Communications Commission, 345 F.2d 730 (D.C. Cir. 1965).

⁶ From the pen of Gelett Burgess (<https://poets.org/poem/purple-cow>):

I never saw a purple cow;
I never hoped to see one.
But I can tell you, anyhow,
I'd rather see than be one.

What also tended to help secure waivers of rules was a bottle or two or three bottles of Chablis – it was the 70s before the era of chardonnay – served well chilled at lunch with the appropriate FCC staff member at Auberge Jacqueline, the French restaurant directly across M Steet from the Federal Communications Commission. We called it “waiver wine.” Long ago, in a deep state far, far away. Those were the days.

The FCC has moved. Jacqueline’s has long since closed. The ever elegant owner, Jacqueline Rodier, who loved cigars and made George Clooney swoon, departed this life in 2007. The rules governing such encounters have put an end to those sorts of transactions.⁷ And the brutally mean hangovers from that particular Chablis remain a distant, but still painful memory.

But it does point to the complication and complexity of applying a single, simple overarching concept of loving God and our neighbor to our day-to-day behavior. The Law is, after all, still a particular expression of love, The command to love is not an invitation to bypass the Law, but to interpret and apply it lovingly, with true regard for its underlying purpose to facilitate love.

And in that regard, we might never underestimate our human ability to rationalize. Consider the following dialogue from the motion picture *The Big Chill*:

[Michael \(played by Jeff Goldblum\)](#): I don't know anyone who could get through the day without two or three juicy rationalizations. They're more important than sex.

[Sam Weber \(played by Tom Berenger\)](#): Ah, come on. Nothing's more important than sex.

[Michael](#): Oh yeah? Ever gone a week without a rationalization?⁸

We all know who we are.

Of course, God did not leave us helpless. We have Scripture, we have an incredibly rich and informative tradition in the Church, we have the wisdom of our gathered communities of faith, and we have our ability to reason. And

⁷ “Remembering Jacqueline Rodier *Washingtonian*, February 7, 2007, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2007/02/07/remembering-jacqueline-rodier/> (accessed September 4, 2023).

⁸ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085244/quotes/>

let's recall again the Spiritual practices that can change our lives that someone mentioned several weeks ago.

That demands that we think, that we discern, that we invoke the presence of Christ in our midst in the Eucharist and in our hearts via the Holy Spirit. It is more challenging than thoughtlessly applying the dictates of the Law regardless of the circumstances and the fact that Jesus was quite clear that the Law has no basis or validity absent its roots in the soil of love.

In fact, as painful as it is for us to acknowledge this, in our current religious and ideological culture and even so often among our fellow Christians, the Law has been lifted from its foundation of love and used to judge rather than love or neighbors. The line between righteousness and self-righteousness is incredibly thin, and divorcing the Law from the command to love is the outcome.

Finally, it may not be a complication as such, but somethings we overlook or neglect. We are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. Yet, how often do we remember to love ourselves. Not to indulge or pamper ourselves, but to love ourselves, to care for ourselves – body, mind, and soul –, to treat ourselves with respect, and to forgive ourselves, despite our knowledge that we are sinners just like everybody else. If we can love our sinful neighbors, we can love ourselves. If to love is to want what is best for our neighbor, then loving ourselves means we want what is best for us. To quote Jonathan Van Ness, “If you don't show up for yourself, it is very difficult to show up for another person.”

That might not always mean what we like. Most of us are at an age that, as our seminary music professor once observed, we go to the doctor, and they find things wrong with us. But loving ourselves means going to the doctor. In his case, the doctor found an aortic aneurism. Fortunately, he had a thoracic surgeon in his choir, and he is living a fulfilling life in retirement. But it remains a cautionary tale.

So let's all remember. All you need is love.

There's nothing you can do that can't be done
 Nothing you can sing that can't be sung
 Nothing you can say, but you can learn how to play the game
 It's easy.⁹

⁹ The Beatles, “All You Need is Love,” <https://genius.com/The-beatles-all-you-need-is-love-lyrics> (accessed September 4, 2023).

Well, maybe not always so easy. Not all the time anyway. But if we win the game, the prize is beyond belief.