

Luke 10:25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27 He answered, “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.” 28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

Luke 10:29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

One of my favorite Hasidic stories is about Abraham and the law. Of course I can never remember the name of the teacher or the name of the student, but the story goes something like this: A student asks his master: Rabbi, it is written that Abraham kept the law in all things, but how could he keep the law when the law had not yet been given?” And the master replies, “Abraham clung to God with all his heart. And before he undertook to do anything, he asked himself whether he would love God more, or whether he would love God less, after it was done. He did only those things that he knew would increase his love for God. And so he kept the law in all things.”

Last week I spoke about some of my meditations on God's law and how it relates to God's love and God's grace. Through his life and his teaching, Jesus shows us that God's realm is one in which mercy and grace are given a higher place than observance of the law. But he doesn't throw out the law—he just says it isn't enough.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, for instance, the law isn't enough. A number of commentators point out that, no matter how we look down our noses at the priest and the Levite, they were fulfilling the law. They both had responsibilities in the temple which demanded they be "ritually pure." If they had touched a man who was sick, or, even worse, dead, they would not have been able to perform their duties at the Temple.

It isn't hard for me to put myself in their place when I imagine their duties. I can hear the priest thinking: "I'd really like to help that guy, but I'm scheduled to lead the 10 o'clock service. It's 9:47 right now. Even if I'm not late, what if he's dead and I touch him? I won't even be able to enter the Temple today. No, I just can't risk it." Or the Levite thinking "Today is my day to carry the ashes from the altar. I always screw this up; some part of my robe is never quite clean enough. The head priest said he's giving me one more chance, and if I can't get there with my clothing spotless and pure, he's taking me off the schedule. He's going to put me outside the temple, shoveling the manure. I know I can get the ashes thing right today. I'm sure somebody else will come along and help that poor man."

So those two, the priest and the Levite, do well by observing the Law. But Jesus is saying the law isn't the end of the story. There is something greater, which is love.

In Luke, it is a young lawyer who gives us the words what we call the Great Commandment.. But in Matthew, it is Jesus himself who gives us the commandment:

Matt. 22:34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to

test him. 36 “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37 He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

That response reminds me of the story about Abraham: that Abraham observed the Law, even before it had been handed down to Moses, because he was determined to love God. If what he did was an act of love for God, then by that he kept the law.

It’s from thinking about the way that love fulfills the law that I come to the conclusion that the law is for us, not over us. Last week I spoke about the two kinds of laws that exist: We could be talking about the way things ought to be, and what we should do. A speed limit is that kind of a law. Or we could be talking about the way things are—not that they should be or ought to be that way, but that they just are that way. Gravity is this kind of law.

We tend to make the assumption that God’s law is the first kind of law: a catalog of coercions to keep us from tearing each other apart. But what Jesus shows us through his life and teaching is that God’s law is actually the second kind of law: a description of the way things are, of the way the world works. The Law is meant to guide us toward what loving action is when we can’t figure it out for ourselves. The fact that the law is written down at all isn’t so for judgment, and it isn’t for me to judge others by. I think the Law is written down as another form of grace, to keep me from hurting myself by acting in a way which is out of alignment with God’s acting. The Law is meant to guide me towards Love, which is to say, the Law is meant to help me align myself with God’s desire for the world. But Love surpasses the law.

But I look at the world around me, I look within myself, and I see how much we prefer the Law to the Love which surpasses it. The Law is clean and easy; the Law lets me divide between good people and bad people, the Law holds out to me the hope that justice will be done, in some other world if it

can't be achieved here. We talk about grace, but we reach for judgment, for the Law that we can beat each other with, for the Law that excuses us from having to love those who are unlike us.

At its best, I think our passion for the Law is a passion for justice. We want to see human beings live *shalom*, live in right relationship with each other and with all creation. We know that God wants shalom. So maybe we use the Law like a club the way we do because it's the most basic way we know to force shalom on people, to force justice into the world.

That's the way we use the Law at its best: in service of our passion for justice. But we also, and more frequently, use the law in a far worse way—as a tool for measuring and judging others, for exclusion. When God promises all of us grace, why do we cling to judgment?

I begin to think that I prefer God's law over God's love because the law sets a limit to my obligations. I can fulfill the law (and right now I am talking about the Law in its most limited sense, as the Ten Commandments and not much more than that) I can fulfill the law and not stop to help a bleeding man in a ditch. I can fulfill the law and keep my slaves. I can fulfill the law without forgiving my enemies.

I begin to wonder whether the reason the Christian community is so identified with the idea of law and judgment is that we cling to the law to express, not God's desire, but our own: that is, the desire that our liability for one another be limited. We don't want to love everybody, at least not the way the Samaritan understood love. We don't have the emotional capacity to love every stranger in that way, and we probably don't have the financial resources, either. At least under the Law we know that there's an end to what God requires—but under Love? When are we ever off the hook if we have to live by Love?

That's kind of the point about the parable of the Good Samaritan. Maybe the lawyer who stands up to ask Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" is really asking him just to test him, or trip him up, as Matthew

implies. But I have to think, the way the lawyer pressed Jesus, that his question was more than a test. I think he wanted to know exactly how far he had to go to earn his place with God. Jesus, after all, kept talking about Love—love for God, love for your neighbor—and this guy wanted to know how much love. What was the standard, so he would know when he had met it? How could he measure himself?

In that regard, the lawyer's question is similar to a question the disciple Peter asks in Matthew 18: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Peter, like the young lawyer, is looking for a limit to love, but Jesus' response, again, isn't very satisfactory. The 77 in his reply isn't actually meant to indicate a finite number. It's meant to indicate a number that you don't count. In other words, there is no limit, just as there is no limit to the love of a neighbor in the story of the Samaritan. When it comes down to it, we don't actually know the end of the Samaritans' burden. How long will the stranger's recovery take, how many pieces of silver will it be before the man is healed and ready to leave the inn?

The reality is that as a human being I am limited, and so my love is bound to be limited. I could sure feel all self-righteous and justified if God said, "fill up 35 cubic yards with love, and you're all good." It would be a finite measure of love suited, in some ways, to my limitations. I have limited time, limited attention, limited strengths, limited resources.

But maybe the reason God doesn't set the standard for Love is precisely because our limitations come in an infinite variety of combinations. Some of us can feed the hungry, but others want to know how to predict earthquakes. Some of us can bandage wounded travelers while others work to alleviate the causes of crime. Some of us work for God by making beauty while others work for God by making roads.

How can there be one standard for all of us? How can there be a single limit that we are all obliged to observe? I think God has drawn the shape of Love for each one of us, but part of faithfulness is to discover and respect the shape. God gives me clues about where and how and whom I am meant to love, how much is enough, how much is more than I can handle, when I need to extend my limits, when I need to pull them closer. But the limit, the standard, isn't a law. The limit is faith itself.

This is where I come to—the law, the written and oral law, is meant to guide me, to keep from falling off the roof, from darkening the light of my soul. It's for my own use, my own learning, my own health. It isn't intended for me to measure others by—or myself. Because the Law isn't as big as what God requires. What God requires is Love. Love isn't measurable, but contains all the measures. And the measures aren't there to coerce us. The law tells us what is, not what ought to be. If we cannot keep the law of Love, that carries its own consequences. Or, as the first epistle of John puts it: “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.” [*1st John 3:14*]