

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
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Epiphany Seattle – Todd Foster  
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## The Greatest Command

*In nomine...*

*“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”*

*“‘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.”*

### I. Ecumenism

When I was a child, the Christian faith spoke to my heart in deep ways: it promised answers to questions and needs I felt acutely. This was a problem when I was seeking to differentiate myself from my parents, who are themselves devout religious practitioners. I wanted to be loyal to God, even as I was trying to figure out how to be my own person, apart from my parents. So for me growing up, a primary means of rebellion consisted in attending other churches. Not the church my parents attended.

You can see why I’m a priest.

I was enchanted by the spirit of Quaker meetings and the people I met there. The youth group at the Southern Baptist church had lots of great kids, even if the teaching was sometimes a little off-putting for me. My loyalty wasn’t connected to denominational commitments or doctrinal litmus tests. I was looking for God and for relationship. I believed and believe those things can be found in the midst of any religious community, and among very many that aren’t especially religious, too!

After seminary I lived in the Bronx, in New York City, where I was part of a team planting new churches. Most weekends, either on Friday night or Saturday night, I would sneak away to a local Orthodox synagogue to pray. What I loved most about attending the synagogue was gaining access to a wider understanding of who God is, what worship is, and who I am. Just as I refused to be limited by denominational lines within Christianity, I was crossing over beyond the Christian fold and finding a belief and a practice which were, on the whole, very fitting for my own faith journey. Worshiping at the synagogue helped me to deepen what I already believed. I believe there is no discontinuity between the Jewish Bible (what we often call the Old Testament) and the Christian Bible (the New Testament). From my point of view as a Christian, they tell a single story. Jesus was not a heretic, nor an inventor, nor an innovator. Jesus did not start a new religion. What Jesus *was* was a reformer.

For most children in our community, Tuesday will be notable because it is Halloween. But our Lutheran friends, and many others, will be celebrating that day the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, thus sparking the Protestant Reformation. So today I wish you, especially if there are any Lutherans present, Happy Reformation Sunday!

## II. שְׁמַע

Jesus was a reformer. So when the Pharisee asked Jesus, “*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?*” this was neither a hostile question nor a trick question. This was a slow ball lobbed right over the plate, an invitation for an easy hit.

Even though tradition had parsed up the Torah into 613 individual commands and prohibitions, most Jews already agreed on which one command was most important. That most important command is one of the essential pieces of daily prayer in the life of every observant Jew to this day: *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.* (Dt 6.4-5)

The greatest command is to love God with your whole heart. Not halfway. Not in a perfunctory way. Not in a limited, Sundays-only, when I’m at church or with people I like or just in the private, personal sphere kind of way. The greatest command is to love God everywhere, at all

times, in every relationship and in every context. Our love of God informs our views of world politics, our opinions about child-rearing, and the ways that we choose to care for our own selves.

To love, of course, is not merely to have a warm feeling of affection. We can love people whom we dislike. To love is to take the needs of the other seriously. To love *God* is to take seriously God's nature, God's preferences for us and for the world, God's concern for us and for nature and for other people, in every decision we make: in every attitude, every action, and every word. Love is a way of responsibility, a way of being in the world. To love God with all of one's heart, soul, and mind is to be intentional so that the reality of God, the nature of God, lies behind every decision we make. It's a habit that is formed over time, like first-time parents, learning to consider the needs of the baby as they re-form their own lives to account for their new reality, their new love.

### **III. Monotheism**

If there is one God, and we were all created by that one God, in the image of that one God, then loving that one God leads unavoidably to a corollary. If I am to love God with all my heart, soul, and mind, then I am going to love the image of God in you. For a monotheist, there is no "other," no person who is beyond my obligation to love whole-heartedly. Partisanship, xenophobia, homophobia, islamophobia, anti-semitism, sexism, nationalism, any kind of discrimination, even an acceptance of radical inequality, are all excluded.

Jesus explained this by pointing to a second command very much like the first: *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*

If I don't like being hungry, naked, homeless, addicted, or uncared-for, then I will not find these to be acceptable states for others, either! Just as I feel the suffering of my child or my spouse, your suffering is real to me and demands my loving response. For me to love God is for me to love you: that is, to take your needs seriously. I may not be able to resolve your needs, but neither will I fail to respond to them in an appropriate fashion. This is the logical conclusion of monotheism.

## IV. Reformation

Happy Reformation Sunday! Reformation is to take words and practices and theologies (like monotheism) that with time have proven a little wonky, a little imperfect, and to re-align them with their true center, so that they operate as they were intended. Loving God and loving neighbor are the true center of religion, human life, and the Kingdom of God.

Doyt pointed out last week that there are some interesting 500 year cycles that happen in the work of reformation on a world-wide, cultural level. Reformation also happens on a *personal* level in *every* generation. The testimony of *my* heart is that the work of reformation is eternal and unceasing and very personal indeed. Reformation, in the end, is a matter of the soul. I can do good deeds; I can follow laws; I can celebrate liturgies. But in doing these things, am I loving God and neighbor? Do my actions, my intentions, my words flow from the love of God? Or do they come from my own search for validation? On my best days, I am a living work of unceasing reformation. Then there's the rest of the time!

I love the Episcopal Church because it is a spacious community, one which incorporates a great breadth of perspectives and ways of encountering God. We recognize that every human belief is partial, inadequate and in need of reform. And that is not only OK, but it is good: it is an invitation to grow and to flourish and to become more centered around these two great commandments to love God and to love one's neighbor. Because no matter who you are or how you worship, God loves *you* and you are a part of God's community.

## **Sermon Questions:**

1. What Biblical command seems most important / relevant / helpful to you?
2. What Biblical command seems hardest to reconcile with these two commands on which Jesus says all others hang?
3. What does the work of reformation look like inside of you?