

Deuteronomy 6:4-6 NIV

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Matthew 22: 34-40 NIV

³⁴Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

³⁷Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

[PRAY]

Last week we considered the relationship of Jacob and Esau—how the two brothers’ sibling rivalry began in the womb and continued well into their adult lives. Jacob stole both his older brother’s birthright and his blessing, after which he fled, because Esau threatened to kill him. Twenty years later they reconcile, after Jacob spent a night wrestling with a man who is God, incognito. As a result of this divine encounter, Jacob believes he has seen the face of God and lived to tell about it. And that experience proves significant when it comes to the brother’s reunion. Esau runs to embrace and kiss him; Jacob says to him: “To see your face is to see the face of God”.

Reconciliation begins with new vision—an ability to see the “other” —our “enemy” our “frenemy”, in the case of Jacob and Esau—to see one’s own flesh and blood-- as one made in the image of a loving God.

In Matthew 22, the religious leaders are trying to trip Jesus up. They are testing him, and so they ask: What is the greatest commandment? This is a good question, because in addition to the Big Ten, there are over six hundred commandments spelled out in the Old Testament! Of course, Jesus gets an A+ on the pop-quiz, because he sums them ALL up in this triad of love: Love God, Love your neighbor as you Love Yourself!

As a result of poor planning, Dennis needed a suit dry cleaned prior to a business trip that was scheduled for the following day. He remembered a place with a huge sign that read, "One HOUR Dry Cleaners" so he drove across town in order to drop off his suit.

As he filled out the tag, he told the clerk: "I'll be back in an hour to pick this up."

"Oh no," she replied. "It won't be ready until Thursday."

"But your sign says, 'ONE hour dry cleaners!'"

"No, that's just the name of the store."

We do a disservice to the name "Christian" when we do not love others. Jesus said: *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* John 13:35. It is one thing to know the greatest commandment; it is quite another to live it!

Today we consider Jesus as a model or example of one who demonstrated this triad of love through the gift or "present of presence". That does that mean?

Let's start with the third of those: loving self. How do we know that Jesus demonstrated self-love?

The gospel writers mention that..." *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. (Mark 1:35)*

This was part of Jesus' daily routine...to seek solitude, time away from people and their demands and agendas, in order to recharge his spiritual batteries, and to seek the guidance of his Father. Jesus made himself present, giving God the Father his time and undivided attention.

Jesus was single-minded, laser focused when it came to fulfilling his life's purpose. Daily he would refresh his marching orders, and reset his heart, mind and soul,

becoming attuned once again to do God's will—nothing more and nothing less. Jesus lived his life before an audience of One, seeking the approval of God alone.

You and I are under pressure from a wide variety of influences today that had not been invented in Jesus' day. But he was not immune to peer pressure, to wanting to please the crowds or the disciples, to seek human approval.

Only by continually submitting to the Father's will was Jesus able to carry out the purpose for which he was sent into the world. If Jesus needed this, how much more do we!

How do we give the gift or "present of presence" to God? By following Jesus' example: Giving God our undivided attention: Time apart in prayer, reflection and study of God's word. Worship, sharing life, and walking with others—these are crucial components of koinonia/Christian community. It is essential that we have relationships in which we can be authentic, honest, and mutually accountable, with regard to our spiritual discipleship. This is part and parcel of what it means to love oneself.

What does it mean to love God and love our neighbor?

1 John 4:20-21 ²⁰Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

How did Jesus give the "present of presence" to others?

Jesus behaved in ways that model for us the love and compassion of God.

Jesus was not impressed by the things that impress us.

Jesus is not concerned with status, ethnicity, labels, or things that are considered status symbols in our culture...designer clothes/shoes/handbag, make and model of car driven, degrees/education, whether one is the CEO or the janitor, etc.

This weekend we remember and celebrate the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. We are still far from accomplishing his dream that we would judge others "not by the color of their skin, but the content of their character". We need to go beyond the superficial and external and look to see the internal and eternal image of God in one another.

Jesus did not let his culture and its values dictate to whom he gives his time, attention, and yes, his love. And this is in large part what got Jesus in trouble!

I can imagine that after a while, the disciples had some interesting conversations among themselves.

“Don’t leave Jesus alone...he just might talk to a woman, and a Samaritan woman at that! God forbid!”

“What does he think he is doing? Jesus is touching lepers!! Scandalous!”

(It reminds me of when Princess Diana visited people dying of AIDS. They were and perhaps still are the “lepers” of our day.)

Jesus stunned everyone by befriending IRS agents! Tax collectors for the oppressive Roman emperor? That was equivalent to fraternizing with the most despicable of enemies!

How shocking, when Jesus hung out with prostitutes, even allowing one to wash his feet during a meal at Simon the Pharisees’ house—disgraceful!

Or was it? Assuming Jesus really “saw” these individuals, as Jacob “saw” Esau, he saw in each of them the face of God! Jesus gave each one the “present of presence”. He made eye contact with them, he took them seriously, conveying worth and dignity to each one. He saw people made in the image of God, people whom he loved, people for whom he would die on the cross.

How do we give the “present of presence” to others today?

The first step in this kind of love, is noticing the other, really seeing those who are invisible, neglected, marginalized. To love in this way begins with noticing, paying attention.

How many times have we gone through a checkout line in the grocery store and before we exit the store, we could likely not recognize the cashier if our lives depended on it? We barely make eye contact with that person.

I read about the **Compassion Test** this week: How moved are you and I to respond to that person at the end of the offramp, or entrance to shopping center parking lot who are holding a sign requesting help?

Honestly, we avoid eye contact, don’t we? Sure. Why? Because if we make eye contact, we will have to “see” that person through Jesus’ lens of compassion. When we truly see, we will be compelled to ACT. Why? Because love described in

the scripture and modeled by Jesus is NOT a warm fuzzy feeling. God's love is demonstrated. If we are obedient to this commandment, it will require concrete expression in benevolent action toward the other.

I know a young man who graduated from college in 2008 during the last major recession. For over a year, he tried everything to find a job, without success. In desperation, he made multiple copies of his resume, dressed in his best and only suit. He got up early and drove to downtown Seattle. He stood on the corner of Seneca, and the freeway offramp at 6 a.m. on a weekday morning, holding a hand lettered sign: "Recent college grad needs job. Must repay student loans. Free resumes!!"

That morning, in three hours he gave away 50 resumes, he collected a dozen business cards of people who said "Call me." Guess how much money he collected--and mind you, he was NOT asking for money! \$345.

In that instance folks seemed more willing to make eye contact, to help him out. I'm guessing that had he been wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and holding a sign simply asking for help the response would NOT have been as generous.

What we "see"—how we "see"—determines/influences our actions.

On a cold November night, Officer Lawrence DePrimo was working a counterterrorism post near Times Square in NYC, when he encountered an older, homeless man who was barefoot. What attracted his attention to him, was the fact that passersby were laughing at him. The officer approached and asked if he had anything to cover his feet. "No but I'm used to it," he said as he started to walk away.

The officer followed and asked his shoe size. Then he entered a nearby store, purchased a pair of size 12 boots and some socks. The store clerk said later: "I was kind of shocked. Most New Yorkers just pass on by these men, especially in this part of town."

This act of kindness would have gone unnoticed, had it not been for Jennifer Foster, a tourist from Arizona who caught the interaction on her cell phone. She posted it to the NY Police Dept. Facebook page with a caption that read: "The officer expected nothing in return and had no idea anyone was watching!" (No surprise here--the post went viral in a short period of time!)

How do we behave “when no one is watching”?? (Because of course Someone is always watching!!!)

During Advent we focused on the reality of the incarnation—**Immanuel, “God with us”**. The blessing and promise of Yahweh to Jacob was that he/**God would be with Jacob**. In a similar way, **Jesus’ promise is to be with us always**. In Greek, one of the words for the Holy Spirit is “paraclete” which means “companion”, or “one who walks alongside”. In other words, **the Holy Spirit is God’s presence *with us!***

This idea of walking alongside or accompanying another is integral to our Christian faith. It is integral to loving one another. The Holy Spirit empowers us to come alongside and share in the suffering of others, if only by being present to/with them. Sometimes we feel helpless. We pray but it feels as if that is not enough. But being present with another in their suffering makes a difference.

Kathy and Marvin were excited for the birth of their son; however it became clear soon after his arrival that Keith their newborn, had a neurological issue. Doctors prescribed physical therapy to help develop the muscle memory and stimulate the muscles and nerve pathways in Keith’s body and brain. He needed daily physical therapy. Their insurance wouldn’t cover all that was needed.

The solution? A team of volunteers from their church stepped up. All agreed to be trained by the physical therapist. Once trained, they set up a schedule so that each week, every day, one of them showed up at the appointed hour to work with Keith. They did this for the first three years of Keith’s life.

Did a miracle of healing happen? Keith was never able to walk on his own, without braces or assistance. No miracle there. But the miracle that occurred was in all of the lives that Keith touched and who touched his. The miracle was in the act of coming alongside and sharing the suffering. It’s all too easy to ignore or overlook, to **not “see”** those with disabilities.

These volunteers truly “saw” Keith as one in whom they saw the face of God! They conveyed dignity and worth to him, and in the process, they showed love, both for God and for themselves. This was the miracle of walking alongside Keith and this family during a season of suffering.

His medical team agreed that Keith would never have walked at all, without this commitment of love and faithfulness. This group of volunteers became a witness to the neighbors, and to the medical team, and to one another, of what “incarnational ministry” looks like. The love of Jesus—**“the present of presence”** - was embodied in these people who showed up every day, week after week, month after month, for three years.

In order to fulfill the great commandment, the triad of loving God, loving neighbor and loving self, we must:

- truly “see” and notice our shared, mutual humanity,
- be willing to come alongside, befriend, and share in the suffering of others,
- and give to God, to ourselves, and to our neighbors, the “present of presence.”

Perhaps there is someone in your sphere of influence, in your neighborhood, at the senior center, in your family or at work, whom God would have you come alongside, and give the “present of presence”. Think and pray about that this week! May God be honored when others say of us: “See how they love one another!”

This is how Jesus modeled for us not only God’s compassion, but the path of reconciliation. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, may we follow Jesus’ example!

PRAY.