

Psalms 146:1 Hallelujah! Praise the LORD, O my soul! I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

Introduction

What is love? I've spoken on it, taught on it, read about it, and preached on it, and all I can say is...I don't know. It's absolutely sublime, paradoxical, inexplicable, unfathomable, and, apparently, eternal—it's never out of fashion. I know in our English vernacular we have one word to describe love: love. That's it. When I think of love I like to think in the Greek forms and words for love: *ἔρος*, *φίλος*, and *ἀγάπη*. It's nice having three terms to define three (generally) different ways to define love.

The first, *ἔρος*, often gets a bad rap being equated to lust and negligent desire, but it's merely the type of love that is akin to bringing into oneself; in other words, this is the type of love that generates a sense of pleasure in your own body. The second, *φίλος*, is love that exists between equals, often used of friends. The third, *ἀγάπη*, is the touted love of loves, the *divine* love. This love is best defined as the love sourced from within ourselves that moves outward toward the object of love who/which becomes the beloved. I promise, I won't break out into a treatise on love...just yet. Suffice it to say, I don't like creating a hierarchy between these various conceptions of love. I prefer to let them exist where they need to, often letting them intermingle and twist, giving different flavors at different times.

But still they are different in that they have different actions related to them.

I love my kids. A lot. Like: mama-bear love them, lift cars-ablaze to protect them, scare off threatening mountain lions type of love. You know, though, I also love jellybeans. A lot. Like a lot a lot. Jellybeans are the one candy that will stop me in my tracks and cause me to grab a few for my travels. But there's a difference in the type of love I have for my kids and for jellybeans. If I threw myself on a pile of jellybeans to protect it from oncoming traffic, you would have every right to drag me off and bring me to the nearest hospital and (especially) therapist. It's okay for me to enjoy eating jellybeans and it's okay for me to desire to risk my life for the lives of my children because the loves speak in specific actions. Jellybeans bring me a certain amount of pleasure as I take them into my body; this is *ἔρος*. My kids draw out of me an action of love that is oriented toward them manifesting as nurture, comfort, and protection (to name a few); this is *ἀγάπη*. Love spoken of and not articulated in action, deserves to be questioned if it is love. If I said I loved my kids or jellybeans, but never once acted in a way that communicated that love, you would be right to be circumspect about my supposed claims of love; this is because love's language is always action.

Mark 12:28-34

And the scribe said to him, "Rightly, teacher, you said truly that '[God] is one and there is not another except [God]. And 'to love [God] from the whole heart and from the whole understanding and from the whole strength' and 'to love the

neighbor as oneself' this is the greatest of all of the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And then Jesus having seen him that he answered wisely said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (Mk 12:32-34b)

The Lectionary of the Book of Common Prayer asks us to jump from the end of chapter 10 of Mark's gospel to chapter 12. What's jumped over is Jesus's entry into Jerusalem, the cursing of the fig tree, the cleansing of the temple, and a visit to the temple where Jesus's authority is questioned by the chief priests and scribes and elders. Chapter 12 opens with Jesus telling the religious authorities of Israel—the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders—a parable. Following this, the Pharisees and *then* the Sadducees embark on a quest to trip-up Jesus with tricky questions. However, Mark's Jesus is presented as triumphant¹ in this portion of his journey to the cross. So triumphant that a certain intrigued and sympathetic Scribe² comes near to overhear Jesus's answers to various authorities testing him. Mark tells us that the Scribe thought Jesus answered the questions well—not merely cleverly but that he answered rightly—and is encouraged to ask Jesus his own question.³

And he does. His is not a trick question aimed to cause Jesus to stumble; but it does have a litmus-test type feel to it. "Of what sort is the most important commandment of all?" It's kind of tricky because, according to the Scribe's own reckoning as a scribe, there are 613 mitzvot/commands in the Pentateuch (the first five books of Moses) varying in type: heavy/light, more essential/less essential, etc.⁴ So, how does Jesus reply? Which one does he choose? None. Rather he summarizes the entire law while ranking two concepts as above the rest⁵: *The first is Shema O Israel, Love God with your whole being and presence;*

¹ RT France *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002. 476. "Mark's way of narrating this episode suggests that in the contest which has been taking place since 11:27 it is Jesus who is now emerging as the clear winner. He will then follow up his advantage with some caustic comments on the scribes (who have been part of the group opposing him since his arrival in Jerusalem) and on other influential people in the temple."

² France *Mark* 478. "...Jesus, the teacher in the temple, is the fixed point while others come and go. But whereas other questions have been posed by groups, giving the impression of official delegations, this comes from an individual, and it soon becomes clear that his attitude is not that of the majority of the γραμματεῖς; He comes already favourably disposed towards Jesus, and leaves even more so. Such an open-minded enquirer prefigures the minority support which Jesus and his followers will find even in the Sanhedrin...His favourable impression derives from listening to the previous dialogues."

³ France *Mark* 479. "καλῶς in this context means not just 'cleverly' (so as to escape the intended trap or even to win the argument), but that Jesus' answers have been good, wholesome, satisfying, leading the scribe to hope for an equally enlightening (not just clever) answer to his own more fundamental question..."

⁴ France *Mark* 477. "Given that there are, according to scribal reckoning, 613 separate commandments in the five Books of Moses...the question of priority could not be avoided. The rabbis discussed which commandments were 'heavy' and which 'light', and sometimes ranked certain categories of law as more essential than others."

⁵ France *Mark* 478. "Jesus is asked which commandment is πρώτη, and he responds by listing the two love commandments as πρώτη and δευτέρα, but then goes on to speak of these two commandments as 'greater' than all others (cf. Mt. 22:38, where πρώτη is apparently equated with μεγάλη). His questioner, in agreeing with him, declares such love to be περισσότερον than the ritual commandments of sacrifice. This evaluative language is not typical of the rabbis, who spoke of 'light' and 'heavy' commandments, but on the understanding that all are equally valid and who, while they might look for summarizing principles, do not seem to have ranked individual

and the second is this: love your neighbor as yourself. It is neither this summary that is surprising nor is it the idea of the love of God and love of neighbor.⁶ The surprising part is Jesus ties together—in an indissoluble divine union—Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19.⁷

Jesus takes the heart of Jewish Liturgy—the *Shema*⁸—and the command to love the neighbor from the book of Leviticus—the book of laws, burnt offerings, and sacrifices—and uses them to summarize the decalogue in terms of *ἀγάπη*: *love* God and *love* the neighbor.⁹ Essentially, Jesus is saying this: the love of God is the basis for the love of neighbor;¹⁰ you can't have one and not the other, they are profoundly linked and are more important than *any* offering, sacrifice, or ritual deed. The love of God will grow itself into a profoundly personal love of neighbor. For Jesus, this is the logical trajectory of the love of God: love your neighbor as yourself. The love of God breeding love of neighbor will, if we keep following Jesus in this narrative, define itself quite radically in word, and, more importantly, in deed. Because love's language is always action.

Conclusion

As 1 John 4:19ff asks, if we say we love God and do not love our neighbor, can we *actually* say we love God? If God loves the cosmos and all the flora, fauna, and humanity with it, and you love this God, then isn't it loving God to love that which and whom this God loves? According to the relationship of loving God and loving neighbor Jesus establishes—not only in his statement to the Scribe but primarily in his actions life toward and for humanity—to love God is to love the neighbor; the love of neighbor is the manifestation of the love of God. It's not that you love God in your own piety and spirituality and reverence toward God (full stop). This is nice, but it's

commandments as 'first' or 'more important'. The difference may not have seemed great at the time, but the sort of language Mark uses here lends itself to later Christian discrimination between elements in the law, particularly with regard to the continuance of animal sacrifice. The scribe's 'demotion' of the sacrificial laws below the obligation to love, and Jesus' warm reception of this view as indicating closeness to the kingdom of God, could not but hasten the Christian abandonment of the ritual elements of the Torah."

⁶ France *Mark* 477. "There was a natural desire for a convenient summary of the law's requirements, a single principle from which all the rest of the Torah was derived (the rabbis used the term *kelal* for such a summarizing principle)."

⁷ France *Mark* 477-478. "So, while these sources vary in date and do not all represent Palestinian thought, it seems likely that the gist of Jesus' response to the question would have caused no surprise. But for his explicit linking together of these two very familiar OT texts we have no Jewish precedent."

⁸ France *Mark* 479. "...not only makes the text more instantly recognizable as the opening part of the Shema but also grounds the 'first commandment' in the essential tenet of Jewish belief, monotheism, and so establishes Jesus' theological orthodoxy."

⁹ France *Mark* 480. "Jesus was asked for one 'first commandment', but responds with two, which together hold the preeminent position. The two are linked both by the key verb *ἀγαπήσεις* and by the fact that they represent respectively the first and second parts of the decalogue."

¹⁰ France *Mark* 480. "...but here, where what is requested is a general statement of priorities, both 'tables' are represented, and with a clear priority between them, *πρώτη* and *δευτέρα*: love of other people finds its true place only on the basis of a prior love of God."

not the full story—it's secondary. Rather, it is this (active) love of God resulting in caring for, defending, providing for, nurturing, comforting, *loving* your neighbor.

And don't we all need love? Real, tangible, material love? How else does God's love get communicated to other bodies and minds and spirits if not by those who have been loved by God and who love God? We are currently consumed with an isolated and further isolating world; people seem to be drifting further and further away from each other. Lines are being irreconcilably drawn in the sand, turning into fissures in the ground and gaping expanses separating people one from another. But it doesn't have to be like this; we can reach for each other rather than leave; we can love each other rather than turn a blind eye.

To love God and not the neighbor is akin to loving God for one's own pleasure (ἔρος); no different than loving a pile of jellybeans because they give one pleasure. In other words, it is not truly loving God; it might be nice, and it might be acceptable, but, according to Jesus in Mark 12, it is not the full extent of what it means to love God. Rather, we are to love God in a way that mirrors the self-sourced and self-giving love (ἀγάπη) of God for us manifest in the activity of Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and driven home by God the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, causing us to love as we have been loved in word *and* deed. Because love's language is always action.