

Loving God and neighbor

Since I am doing the first sermon of the series on loving God, I would like to zoom out and reflect on the very notion of love, and then to talk briefly about loving God and neighbor in a “Biblical way.” Dt 6,4ff is an important passage on the subject of loving God, but even more importantly, it was considered by the Jews in the time of Jesus and to this day to be central to their faith. Jesus also takes up this passage in the Gospels, in Mk 12,29-30 and parallels. Like the other Jews of his time, Jesus saw in this text something at the heart of the faith, and Jesus calls it the first of the commandments, adjoining to it another from Lv 19,18: “Love your neighbor like yourself.”

So loving God and loving our neighbor is considered by Jesus to be central to our faith. But what is love? In our culture, for example in our songs and movies, love is firstly romantic love. It is a state one is in. We could even say it is a state one incurs or suffers. One *falls* in love, in spite of oneself. One *is* in love.

“It is not my fault, mom, I love her.” Or in a British Masterpiece Theater show “I can’t marry the Duke, papa, I love the peasant.” And of course we, the audience, are always on the side of the poor woman who is asked to marry against love. One doesn’t choose whom one loves, one can and should only choose to marry whomever one happens to love. It is cold-hearted and cruel to go against love as feeling.

So in our songs, we sing mostly about the beginning and the end of love. We sing about the adolescent love of the beginning, the enchantment period (“I can’t stop loving you”), or about the break-up, the end of love. We don’t sing about love as a verb of action, only as a verb of state, as a feeling. We don’t sing much about sticking with our wife out of loyalty when the marriage falls on hard times or in the

case of a chronic illness. We don't think of love as a decision or as something you do, more as something you feel.

So it is not too surprising when we turn to the Bible that we import our modern romantic concept of love to the words we read in the Bible. First, when we read "Love the Lord with all your heart," of course we think of love as feeling, we think God, when asking us to love him, is like that father who wants to produce a feeling in his daughter that is not there: "you *will* marry the Duke and love him." But is that what Dt 6 means when it says we must love God with all our heart? The heart is not the seat of emotions in the Biblical anthropology, it is the seat of the will, of the mind. Of course, God isn't against us loving him with feelings, but he doesn't ask us that.

Dt 6 asks us to love God with our entire will, our entire thinking, our entire being, by being oriented towards him, and to be loyal to him. It is not very different from Jesus' injunction: "Seek first the kingdom of God."

In that same book, Deuteronomy, God asks repeatedly to his people to fear him, to serve him, to search him, to obey and love him. These are parallel verbs, without exactly being synonyms. Let's read Dt 10,12-13; 11,1.8.13.22.31-32;13,4.

In fact, the love asked by God is the same kind of love he himself manifests: Dt 10,17-20 (see the parallel: he loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. How does he love the alien? By providing him with food and clothing). Let's also read Dt 7,8-13.

Loving in the Bible isn't so much what we feel for others. It is not a verb of state, it is a verb of action. When Leviticus or Jesus say "Love your neighbor as yourself," again we think we need to feel something big for others. Or even worse, I've heard people say: "this means that before you can love others, you need to love yourself." Now this may be true in a psychological way, I don't know, but it absolutely is not what Jesus is talking about. Loving others like ourselves isn't

about self-esteem for Jesus. When Jesus says we must love others like ourselves, he supposes that we already do love ourselves, but in a Biblical sense. That is, we take care of ourselves, of our own needs, and we are pretty good at that. We have a strong preservation instinct. We eat when we're hungry, we drink when we're thirsty, we put on a vest when we're cold. You meet a lion in the savannah, you don't ask yourself: "Is it worth the trouble of running to try to escape, or should I just let myself get eaten?" You are under threat, you run. End of story. Our survival or preservation instinct is a good thing, and it is deeply anchored in us, so it is assumed to be there when Jesus says to love others like you do yourself. Apart for some serious psychological states or conditions, everyone loves his or her self in a Biblical sense, regardless of their self-esteem. This is true to the point that our problem usually is not self-neglect, but neglecting the needs of others at the expense of fulfilling our own needs.

So when Jesus says we have to love others like we do ourselves, he means we need to take care of others like we already do for ourselves. That's a pretty consistent message with the rest of Jesus' teachings: take care of your neighbor. So to love our neighbor like ourselves is precisely to consider the needs of others, not just ours. It is loving in a concrete way, by taking care of others.

In a similar way, when Jesus asks us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us, Jesus is not asking us to have strong fuzzy feelings for them, but to act with kindness to them, to seek their well-being, in the same way that God acts for the good of the good and the evil (Mt 5,44-45).

So Biblical love is more "love as action" than "love as feeling." It is first a decision, an act of loyalty. It is in this way that we have to understand, for example, the demand of Jesus to love him more than one's family, for example in Lk 14,26. It is not that we have to feel more for him than our family, but that we must be

ready to follow him and obey him even when people closest to us ask of us something that would conflict with his teaching.

Everything I have said so far may feel a little cold-hearted: we must love as a verb of action, not a verb of state or feeling, as if I was encouraging us to go back to a Victorian time when we love only out of duty and feel nothing. Of course that is not the point, we simply must be careful not to import our modern understanding of love to the Bible.

I think that when Jesus talks about our relationship to God, one important aspect of how he says we love him and God is to respect and obey him, but another central teaching of Jesus is that we must consider God as father. And that is a radical departure from the usual understanding of God and gods throughout the Ancient World.

The thing is, most people had a very utilitarian relationship with the gods. The gods didn't care about humans or their plight, and humans only cared about the gods in so far as neglecting their duties towards them as their slaves meant trouble, and you could bargain favors from the gods at times. Even today, that is a common view of God: we pray to get something from God, and then forget about him till some other problem comes up.

But Jesus redefines how we should relate to God. He says we shouldn't try to manipulate God, but we should ask him with the attitude and confidence of a child toward a parent: Mt 6,6-8. And God will answer, not because he has to, but because he is as a loving parent: Mt 7,9-11. And incidently, Jesus links this to the other aspect we have been talking about today in the following verse: Mt 7,12. This is yet another place where Jesus joins love of God and love of neighbor.

So yes, love in the Bible is first an attitude, a choice, more than a feeling, but we shouldn't think that it is only a cold-hearted scheme aiming at manipulating God. We need to approach God with the loving confidence of a child to a parent.

