

You want to hear a ghost story? I'll tell you a ghost story. A man died suddenly and unexpectedly, and therefore unprepared. That's something the church has always tried to prevent, by encouraging people to always have a relationship with God, to pray frequently, every day, at least. The dead man was not a member of the Episcopal Church, but some of his family apparently had some tie to us. They didn't call me to alert me of his death or to do his funeral. They called me because, two days after his body had been taken out of the house, they were very concerned. They were so sad, and afraid, and exhausted when they told me, he's still here. Can you help us? And of course they were afraid I wouldn't believe them, wouldn't respect them.

I don't know how many of my colleagues would have tried to convince them there's no such thing as ghosts, or offer some kind of platitudes over the phone. I suited up and went in. Cassock, surplice, black stole, three prayer books and a candle. Who you gonna call? Even though I had absolutely no training in this sort of thing from seminary, or anywhere else.

The whole family was gathered in the living room and kitchen. I went through making holy water the old-fashioned way according to the English Ritual, lit a candle, and said some prayers with them, then headed up to the bedroom. The site of the death. Only a couple of them came with me. His wife, I think, and maybe one of his children. Very quiet. From the Book of Common Prayer, I read the prayers you pray at the moment of death, what would have been the last rites if there had been a body to anoint. Then, from the Book of Occasional Services, I blessed the room, applying holy water liberally.

We rejoined the family downstairs and I completed the blessing of the home and the family. We prayed the Lord's Prayer together. I don't know if anything supernatural happened, but something deeply human happened. Despair and fear gave way to warmth, gratitude, hope. They no longer felt the unwelcome presence of death, the vicarious spiritual irritation of things left undone.

That's the way it goes with loving your neighbor, sometimes that love takes us to places we never would have expected. But if you've truly internalized the principle of loving God and neighbor, you don't need to worry as much about how to handle an unexpected situation. Deciding that you'll do your best to answer Jesus's challenge doesn't mean you'll become a perfect person; that's impossible. It doesn't mean you'll know the answer to every question. But when you structure your intentions and sense of self around a commitment to love of God and neighbor, you'll meet people where they are, take them seriously, and treat them graciously. And that can get you, and them, a long way.

Christians commit to practicing love. All of us, all the year. We all have stories to tell, and I encourage you to keep sharing them, with me and with each other. You'll get to hear a few of those stories during our God at Work series, and during stewardship moments next month. Because we need to be reminded that, at least some of the time,

we actually can fulfill the two commandments that Jesus said define the whole law, that is, the whole relationship between God and humanity. And living this way makes our lives better right now, which means we have a lot to be grateful for.

So, we should take a moment to consider that Jesus's answer to the lawyer's question was both traditional and revolutionary. Jesus and his enemies agreed that God had revealed truth to humanity that was recorded in the Jewish Scriptures, which therefore held authority and commanded respect. Particularly the first five books, together known as the Torah, the Law. The Torah was both a sacred story of the relationship between God and humanity and a vision of what that relationship could, or should, be. They also agreed that there was some sort of hierarchy among the many commandments of the Torah. The first passage Jesus quoted: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," would not have been controversial. They all already worshiped, prayed, and studied. God's sovereignty, greatness, and goodness made a loving response not just appropriate but natural, almost like how the Earth's mass causes us to be attracted by its gravitational pull.

So now you see why the rest of Jesus's answer was revolutionary. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Loving another human being is as important as loving God? We, who are so much less than God? Our neighbors, who are kind of weird and make a lot of mistakes? Yes! Not because we are in any way God's equals, but because we are in every way God's beloved. God revealed that love to us throughout history, meeting God's people where we are. That's why the Bible is so important, why it even exists: when God reveals things, you better write them down!

The second part of this passage is harder to unpack and I don't have time to go through it in detail, but it does relate to the first. Jesus's question about the Messiah, "Whose son is he?" isn't really about genealogy, family, or inheritance. While Jesus was a descendant of King David, that wasn't the most important thing about him. If it were, then restoring the monarchy would have been his mission. But Jesus's most important relationships are with God and with all humanity, not any one nation, and thus his mission is cosmic, not national. Jesus wasn't there to re-establish a nation-state, but to reconcile all humanity to God, the ultimate act of love.

Many sermons on this passage dwell on the impossibility of obeying these commandments, and it's absolutely true that our sins and flaws and limitations render perfect practice impossible. But just like with being a parent, there's no way to be a perfect Christian, but there's a million ways to be a good one. Jesus's words and acts of love make it possible for us to be like him in the most important way.

Loving relationships with God and our neighbor are the most important things we can cherish and invest in, even though they can lead us to do strange things in unexpected places, and the grace which Jesus makes available to us means that these relationships can be thoroughly joyful and life-giving. In our life with Jesus, we no longer

fear the unwelcome presence of death, nor the spiritual irritation of things left undone. Jesus is present in every act of love, whether mundane or extraordinary, and so we are always prepared. In this way we become free from despair and fear, we enjoy warmth, gratitude, hope. Great or small, no act of love is ever done in vain.