

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Jack Frederick Nietert on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 29, 2012 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

A new standard

Today would be a good day to begin with a lawyer joke or two but Scott is watching the clock so I'll move on.

A lawyer asked Jesus a question to test him. Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? And without the slightest hesitation, Jesus knew his response.

As a Jew he would have been completely and thoroughly immersed in what was a cornerstone of Hebrew life and thought. Every morning and every evening every Jew repeated a single line from the creed of Israel. Every service he had attended would have begun with it and it had been impressed upon his consciousness from early on—the Creed of Israel—Deuteronomy 6:4-5. “Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

That was the Creed of Israel and the next verses stress how important this creed was to the people of Israel. “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Some folks today go so far as to say that this creed is Judaism's greatest contribution to the religious thought of humankind.

Leviticus 19:18 was also quoted by Jesus and he put these two Commandments together saying the second is like the first, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now just who is this God that we are to love with all that we are? From the Jewish perspective, as Rabbi Kaufman at Hebrew University in Jerusalem says, the cornerstone of Judaism is its monotheism, that God is one and that God is holy. The God of Israel is singular, unique, and incomparable. This is the good God of creation, the God beyond all gods and goddesses, the one who is wholly other. This is the God who is the source of all, who called creation into being out of nothing. This God alone exists as Sovereign and has no rivals. This is the God from whom we came and this is also the God in whose image we were created, who sustains us and redeems the world.

And this very same God yearns to be in relationship with each of us, in a relationship of faith and love. He calls us to “shalom”—peace. He calls us to move from idolatry—the worship of all temporary things or beings—to put one's trust entirely in this Lord and God. He calls us to turn from all “isms”—paganism, poly theism, dualism, pantheism—to the only one God.

Well, how do we enter into the depths of this most profound relationship? How do we move from our fallen state, our separated state to experience the saving power of God's providence? That is **the** key question of any religion.

The Jewish response and all the world's religion's response is: Work at it! In Judaism the answer was keep the commandments, do justice, give mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

Jesus tied love of God to love of neighbor as self. This demands for others the kind of love we give ourselves and originally it applied only to one's immediate neighbors—fellow Jews. Jesus expanded on that...who is my neighbor? In response to that question he told the parable of the good Samaritan. Everyone is your neighbor. Elsewhere he says, "If anyone says they love God and hate their neighbor, that person is a liar." You can't love God and hate your neighbor.

It is also interesting to note that at the end of the Gospel of John in Jesus' "farewell discourses" Jesus doesn't tell the disciples to love their neighbors as themselves. He gives them a new standard—a new commandment—a new measuring stick for neighbor love. He says, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Jesus' love, not self love, becomes the new, true model for the disciples. By this unconditional, sacrificial love, the world will know that the disciples belong to Jesus.

Now comes the hard one. How do we love God with all and how do we love our neighbors as Jesus loves us? In John 14:15 Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Those who love me will keep my word. A little later on he says, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you and remind you." Elsewhere, "Work out your own salvation for God is at work in you to do his will." In other words, God will help us keep his commandments. God will help us be faithful. He who went so far as to die for us, he is the one who will lead us to God and neighbor love...if we let him help!

When others say "Work at it, earn your own salvation," Christianity says, "Let God help you love today and every day. Let God work in you to do his will, for God is at work in you to do his will.