

4 June, 2006 ☞ With All Your Heart, Your Soul, Your Strength

Call to Worship

Enter with me the sacred space.
Bring with you what is yours –
A burdened heart, a joyous song,
A wearied spirit, a seeking mind.
Bring the gift of yourself to this place.
It is an honorable gift.

Readings:

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NRSV: New Revised Standard Version)

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. 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.

Mark 12:28-34 (NRSV)

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked [Jesus], “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Sermon: “With All Your Heart, Your Soul, Your Strength”

My charge this morning is to answer this question posed to me by Fred Gamble: can this “The Great Commandment” be appreciated by someone who is neither a theist nor deist (or, I would add, by someone who simply lacks a comfortable way of thinking

about God)?

Yes, I surely think so. To arrive at how we might find meaning and relevance in this teaching, regardless of our diverse theologies, I'm going to do 3 things:

- provide historical context for the biblical account
- offer an alternate translation of Jesus' words
- draw upon the work of theologian Paul Tillich to suggest that trying to make "God" the object of our love is the wrong starting point. Instead, I'm going to argue that our love and unconditional devotion which are life-affirming point towards what "god" is for each of us.

Biblical context

This story from Mark's Gospel, the earliest of the four Gospels, also appears in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, written a generation later. At this point in all three of synoptic gospels, Jesus has already established his reputation as a teacher in his native land of Galilee; he has entered Jerusalem, where local authorities confront and challenge him.

Here, Jesus is asked to name the most important Jewish law. (In Mark's version, the question comes from a friendly scribe. In the stories told in Matthew and Luke, Jesus is questioned with more hostility by a lawyer – an authority on religious law.)

In those times, as today in some Jewish circles, it was common practice to analyze and debate Mosaic laws; scholars would argue about how to elegantly and faithfully pare down hundreds of laws (613 in the Old Testament) into fewer basic ones. But here, when Jesus is asked to name, from those hundreds, the *single* most important law – well, that's a trick question, somewhat equivalent to asking an artist to choose a single work of art as his or her best.

Ever quick on his feet, Jesus does not choose his answer from Mosaic law or even the Ten Commandments; instead he quotes the *Shema*, a line of ancient Hebrew scripture:

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad

You heard this most famous of all Jewish sayings in the first reading, from Deuteronomy. It means "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." The *Shema* leads into a section called the *V'ahavta*, which says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." This is the instruction that Jesus chooses as most important.

(Jesus then wraps up his answer by adding a second teaching from the Hebrew

scriptures – Leviticus 19:18: “You must love your neighbor as yourself.”)

Love for God, Jesus is saying, supercedes all our human constructions: burnt offerings, sacrifices, the motions we go through to honor to God. None of these matters as much as aligning our hearts and minds and spirits, and orienting them towards the Source of Life. It's as if, were an artist forced to choose a single “best” work of art, the artist said, “The greatest work of beauty is not what I create, but rather the gift of creativity that comes forth through my hands.”

As we hold up and peer at the instruction to “Love God with all your heart, your soul, your strength,” the next step is to try on a different phrasing.

An alternate translation: *let love be born....*

Neil Douglas-Klotz is an independent scholar of religious studies known for his mystical, poetic translations of Aramaic texts. Aramaic is the language that Jesus spoke, a language that, “unlike Greek, ...presents a fluid and holistic view of the cosmos,”¹ so every word is layered with meaning.

Jesus was *quoting* Hebrew scripture, but would have used Aramaic words along these lines:

*Detrahm l'marya Alahak
men kuleh lebak
wa men kuleh naphshak
wa men kuleh haylak
wa men rewwhyanak...²*

The phrase *l'marya Alahak* is translated in the Bible as “the Lord your God,” but Douglas-Klotz explains that

the word *Marya*,...translated as ‘Lord,’ stems from the root *mar* – the elementary rising principle that shines, lightens, and heats all things...the

¹ Douglas-Klotz, p.3.

² In *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*, ed. and with commentary by Neil Douglas-Klotz (p.80-81). Douglas-Klotz's source for the Aramaic is a version of the Syriac Aramaic manuscript of the Gospels (p. 4-5).

light of the One shining through material creation.³

This is Douglas-Klotz's translation of Jesus' words from the Aramaic:

From the deepest part of yourself, let love be born for the rays of the One that shine around you...

*Let this come from your whole heart –
the center of your life; your passion, your courage, and audacity –
and touch your whole subconscious self –
that instinctive soul within ..which scatters and gathers.*

*From this self liberate your whole animal energy and
life force to flood your entire grasping mind with love.*

*This is the most important commandment – the first creative
movement that empowers all others.*

This reading turns Jesus' teaching from an order to love – which is somewhat of an oxymoron, if you noticed – into an *invitation*. “Let love be born”.... love not for a finite, personified God, but love for the wholeness of life – the One – shining and rising around us; this love needs to come from “the center of your life, your passion...your whole animal energy.” It's an invitation to fully engage that which is life-giving, life-affirming, rich with power and passion and possibility.

Our “ultimate concern” points to our god

We could stop there, but let's take that invitation – “From the deepest part of yourself, let love be born for the rays of the One that shine around you” – and look through another lens: the work of the 20th century Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich.

³ Douglas-Klotz, p. 81.

Tillich spoke of God as “beyond essence and existence,” and the very “Ground of All Being.” To tell the truth, however, the question “Is there a God?” didn’t matter much to Tillich. For him, the central question was: “*Are you concerned with, or indifferent to, the nature of ultimate reality?*”⁴ Are we capable of being *ultimately concerned* ?

What does it mean to have an “ultimate concern”? “It means,” said Tillich, “that we are involved in it, that a part of ourselves is in it, that we participate with our hearts.”⁵ The great work of our lives, and the key to our becoming, is to intentionally engage life with our “*infinite attention, unconditional devotion, [and] ultimate passion.*”⁶

The key is to be awake, and to know with clarity what you are concerned about, ultimately.

Of course – who doesn’t know this? – in the course of an ordinary day, we’re consumed by concerns that are finite and transitory. We’re distracted by concerns about work, our relationships, ourselves, and getting our basic needs met. *What am I going to eat for dinner? Does Martha hate me or is she just in a bad mood? How am I going to pay for this? Do these pants make me look fat?*

All of these things compete for our anxiety, but some manage to hook into our sense of devotion. Our world, in all its brokenness and suffering, is filled with people whose greatest concern is satisfying an appetite for money. Some people, often trapped by their own physiology, make a god out of their drug of choice – alcohol, food, sex – by craving it above all else. The more we discover gods through our appetites and desires, the more we realize that Ralph Waldo Emerson was spot-on when he said:

A person will worship something – have no doubt about that... That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.⁷

⁴*Dynamics of Faith* by Paul Tillich (p. 46).

⁵In *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church, p. 33, excerpted from *The New Being* by Paul Tillich.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Reading #563 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

None of these transitory things – money, alcohol, sex, shoes, power over other people – is an *ultimate* concern. We are ultimately concerned, says Tillich, only about that which is infinite, ultimate, and lasting. You are *ultimately concerned* with those things that (in the words of Neil Douglas-Klotz) come from your whole heart, the center of your life, your passion, your courage – in other words, from your authentic self. Your *ultimate concern* is that which “liberate[s] your whole animal energy and life force to flood your entire grasping mind with love.”

*You shall love the Source of Life, the shining of life’s wholeness,
with all your heart and soul.*

*Let love be born in you, empowering and creative,
life-giving and life-affirming.*

In each of you, there is a life force that already loves with all its might. There is an “ultimate passion” that responds eagerly to the invitation to “let love be born for the rays of the One that shine around you.”

What is it reaching towards? What is that life force hungry for?

This is the reason that we come together in religious community: to find our way towards the answers.

What this world asks of us is to name, thoughtfully and with reverence, what you are living for with your heart, and souls, and strength; to be awake to your living.

May it be so.

Benediction

The words of Reverend Howard Thurman:

“Don’t ask what the world needs.
Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it.
Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Go and bless the world with your coming alive.