

“THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT”

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 22:34-46

October 23, 2005

The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

Copyright © 2005

It is the most copied photograph in the world. It graced the cover of *National Geographic* magazine, was then voted photograph of the decade, and finally photograph of the century by the *National Geographic* editors. You’ve all seen it: a head shot of a young Afghani girl taken in 1985 at the time of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. The photographer captures her, head covered, face dirty, eyes wide with a deer-in-the-headlights stare, old eyes in a young face, the eyes of a child who has seen too much, lived through too much, a young person whose only certainty is uncertainty. How many of you know the photograph I’m speaking of?

She became the poster child, if you will, for the plight of refugees, the victims of war everywhere. The image is restrained; it does not feed our lust for gore, for the detailed graphics of a particular violence. Instead, it is haunting. She could be anyone, anywhere, her eyes a mute challenge for us to recognize in her our own humanity and to respond. Whenever I hear Jesus’ words from this morning’s reading from Matthew: that we should “love God with all our heart and soul and mind and our neighbor as ourselves”—every time I hear those words, it is the image of this young woman that I see.

The Pharisees, we are told, asked Jesus the question of “what is the greatest commandment?” to test him, to trip him up. In Jewish law, the tradition was that all the law was equal in God’s sight; you couldn’t pick and choose what was important and what not. Moral law, ritual law: it was all of God, and all to be obeyed. What is interesting about Jesus’s response to the Pharisees’ question is that he takes the center of the Sh’ema, the closest thing Judaism has to a creed “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one and 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”—Jesus takes this beloved, so well-known part of the Jewish law and pairs it with an obscure phrase from Leviticus 19, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus puts them together and proclaims that all the Law derives from these two.

Love of God and love of neighbor. We take the pairing for granted; it is bedrock Christian theology. We’ve heard it so much, it rolls right over us; but when Jesus said it that first time, it was a new pairing—and a brilliant answer to his opponents. Because if one takes the two together, both the moral law and ritual law follow from them. And when the two stand together, what is underlined is the idea of love as the basis for all religious observance.

When I was in preaching class 25 years ago, my preaching teacher was a former attorney named Bill Muehl. Bill had a list of preaching dictums that he called “Muehl’s Mutterings,” and at the very top of the list was that one should never try to preach a sermon about Christian love. In his then 59 years of experience as an Episcopalian layperson, he told us, sermons that tried to wax eloquent about love ended up being some combination of saccharin, sentimental, clichéd, and thoroughly nauseating. I’ve never forgotten his caution. But it creates a problem. Because it is

important for Christians that Jesus commanded us to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves; and it is equally important that we understand what Jesus meant by this commandment to love.

Love God; love your neighbors as yourselves. Where we start in understanding Jesus' words is by taking note of the fact that these are commandments Jesus is giving—not hopes, or suggestions, or invitations, but commandments. You have to do this. But how can you command someone to have a feeling. Feelings aren't commandable, as anyone over the age of 13 has learned. You can't command someone to have a feeling of love toward you. You can't command yourself to have feelings of love towards someone else. This tells us something important about the kind of love about which Jesus is speaking. When Jesus speaks about love, he is not talking at all about feelings. That can't be overstated. There's nothing sentimental or warm and squishy about it. Hallmark is never going to produce a card celebrating Jesus' understanding of love. The love that Jesus commands, both towards God and towards neighbor, is about commitment and it is about action. In the Hebrew Bible, the word used is *chesed* and it is translated as "steadfast love." It is this love that is attributed to God in how God relates to humankind and to all of creation. Steadfast love, a love that is committed to acting in loving ways irrespective of feelings.

I want to step back for a moment and point out that in fact the love that Jesus commands is really not so different from any other important love. As parents, we discipline ourselves to act in loving ways towards our children even when we don't feel particularly loving towards them. As partners or even in friendship, what brings longevity to a relationship is the steadfastness that continues the commitments of love and friendship at those moments or days or even years that the warmth of feeling isn't there. Steadfast love—most mature adults have some knowledge of what this is, but I'm not sure that in our culture we recognize that steadfastness in and of itself as love. And I think it helps to make that identification, both as we approach the relationships with those close to us, and as we ponder this enormous enterprise of loving God and neighbor as we love ourselves.

Which brings me back to the photograph where I started. This young refugee with dirt on her face and those oh so piecing eyes. What the photograph evokes in us is not the warmth of emotion but the jolt of recognition. What is powerful about this photograph is that the young woman's humanity claims our own, and demands a response, not because we like her or feel pity for her, but simply because of the almost defiant statement that she is. And what are we going to do about her and all the people like her all over the world. The photograph calls out an unsentimental love that moves us to a commitment to act in this young woman's behalf because she could so easily be you, or me, or anyone we love. The image of her humanity is that universal.

I think that most Christians have a misapprehension that if we were only more faithful, we would feel a love of neighbor that would lead us to want to care for all the world. If we were only more faithful, we would feel a love for God that would fill our hearts and enliven our worship. And if we are deeply faithful, perhaps those feelings may come. But that's not the love that Jesus commands us to. Jesus commands us to the love that is based on recognition not feeling. Simply because God is God, we will worship, we will obey, we will work to align our wills with God's. And that is love, steadfast love, warm feelings included or not included. Simply because our

neighbors share our common humanity, and they are God's as we are God's, we will commit ourselves to act on their behalf—even if we don't understand them, even if we fear them, even if we don't like them, even if they are distasteful to us. We recognize them, and we act as we would have them act, and that action is love.

Some would say it is a cold obedience laid out here. But Jesus knew what we too often would ignore: that the transformation of the heart is in the doing, not necessarily the feeling. Act generously, do it over and over again, and your heart will become generous. Act kindly, and you will become kind. Live each day committed to actions of steadfast love towards God and towards neighbor, and you will learn greatness of spirit. Said Jesus to the Pharisees, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Work to obey the commandments and you will have done the work of love. Thanks be to God. Amen.