Sunday, November 2, 1980
WHICH COMMANDMENT IS THE FIRST OF ALL?
Mark 12:28-34

Not long ago, I received a phone call from a stranger who was interested in discovering what I believed as a Christian minister. From the way he asked his questions it was also evident that he had some doubt as to whether or not I could be considered a Christian. After some preliminary discussion, he asked this question: “If you were called to the bedside of a dying person who was not a member of any Christian Church and as far as you knew was not a Christian, what would you say to him?”

I’m sure that I knew what he wanted me to answer — something like, “Repent of your sins, and accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior here and now before you die, and you will be saved.” Instead, I gave an answer which I believe has the same meaning only using different words. I said that I would assure the dying individual that God loved him, and that God is above all a loving God. I would also do my best to let the dying person know that I also loved him. I would be saying in other words, believe the fact that God loves you and cares for you. Accept God’s love in your own life.

This incident reminded me of the question which one of the Scribes asked Jesus one day — “Which commandment is the first of all?” Which commandment is the most important to follow? The answer Jesus gave according to the Gospel of Mark was: “The first commandment is this, ‘Hear O Israel: the Lord our God 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.’ The second is like this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

We love because God first loved us. Love of God and neighbor is basic to life and the Christian faith. All else flows from this. Paul was saying the same thing in First Corinthians 13: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” It’s what St. John was writing about in his New Testament letters — “Beloved let us love one another, for love is of God and the one who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love, does not know God; for God is love. If anyone says, ‘I love God and hates another human being, that one is a liar.'”

Love of God and neighbor is basic to all of life. Some years ago, an experienced counselor wrote a book entitled, “LOVE OR PERISH.” In the introduction to the book, he said -

“For more than forty years, I have sat in my office and listened while people of all ages and classes told me of their hopes and fears, their likes and dislikes, and of what they considered good or bad about themselves and the world around them. I have listened while mature people tried to piece together the converging patterns of their troubled lives. I have listened while adolescents confided their secret resentments and anxieties, and while very young children told me by indirection where things were going wrong with them. I have listened too, while elderly people explained where they had failed, where succeeded and what hopes they cherished £or the future.

As I look back over the long, full years, one truth emerges clearly in my mind — the universal need for love. Whether they think they do or not, all people want love. They want to know someone cares for them. Their spoken words may tell of other things, but their need for love is

evident in many ways. We cannot survive without love. We must have it or we will perish. Without love we lose the will to live. Our mental and physical vitality is impaired, our resistance is lowered, and we succumb to illnesses that often prove fatal. We may escape actual death, but what remains is a meager and barren existence, emotionally so impoverished that we can only be called half-alive.

What this psychiatrist discovered through his counseling the Christian faith has been proclaiming for centuries. However, the Christian proclamation adds one very important ingredient — we know in addition to our loving that God loves each one of us and all of us and that God loves the whole world. Love is the power behind and in all of creation. Love is God at work in the creation. It is a power and force that has no equal. Love is the creative force of God in the world, and we experience this power in and through our love of others and their love for us. All love begins with God and ends with God — "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." So it is that the commandment to love God and to love other human beings is the first of all.

Love of God and love of neighbor has several components.

1. Note first, that there is a personal component to love of God and others. In this personal side of love there is incredible healing power. Love of one another calls forth the best that is in us. A story that Reuel Howe tells in his book, THE CREATIVE YEARS, shows the dynamic power of love.

Jane Foster had been a lovely young woman and her parents had done their best to give her every advantage. She was most attractive and popular and had many talents. In her 21st year, she fell in love with an able and handsome young man. On the eve of her marriage, she collapsed, and the ceremony had to be indefinitely postponed. At first it seemed as if she were exhausted and that a good rest was all that she needed. Her condition grew worse, however. She was depressed, made several attempts on her life, and finally had to be taken to a mental hospital. Even there, she deteriorated until she would do nothing for herself. She simply sat in a corner, day after day, looking at the floor, a pathetic contrast to the bright creature she used to be.

Naturally, her family and close friends were shocked at this change in her for which there seemed no explanation. The doctors talked to her parents, her fiancé and others who might throw some light on her case. But her condition remained the same — inert, sullen, silent. The weeks in which she remained in this condition passed into months and the months into a year.

Toward the end of the year, Dr. Miller, superintendent of the hospital where Jane was a patient, began sitting for his portrait. The artist, George Sundan, encouraged the Doctor to take about his work. One day, Dr. Miller told him about Jane's case and confessed his sense of helplessness. "Nothing we do or say to her seems to reach her," Dr. Miller said. "None of the usual treatments have an effect on her."

The artist went on painting while the doctor continued to talk about his work. Finally, the artist asked if he could see Jane. They left the doctor's office and when down the long lonely white corridors of the hospital to where Jane sat on the floor in the corner. The artist stood on the threshold, looking at the girl who seemed to be more dead than alive — a human being whose spirit had departed, leaving only a mechanically breathing body. All signs of animation and creativity were gone, and only hopeless isolation remained. Jane was the complete embodiment of despair and defeat, a condition that on occasion we all experience partially.

The artist stood there for just a few moments, then he moved slowly toward her, at the same time drawing something from his coat pocket. Then he stooped down and held out his hand, under her apparently unseeing eyes, a lump of clay that he gently molded with his fingers. There was no indication of response from the young woman; in a few moments he rose to his feet and went out with the doctor.

“May I drop in and see Jane whenever I come to work on your portrait?” he asked. I’d like to try to reach her.

Permission was granted and each time the artist finished his work on the portrait, he went back to see Jane. And each time he repeated the same routine of his first visit. He stooped down, held out his hand before Jane’s eyes, and slowly worked the clay with his fingers. The portrait was soon finished, but he continued to come back to the hospital to visit Jane. Then one day she timidly reached out her hand and touched the clay. On another of his visits, she took the clay in her hands. Later she took the clay and closed her fingers around it; and when she opened them, she looked wonderingly at the impression she had made on the clay.

Visit followed visit, and each time there was a little more response. Then one day she worked the clay with both hands, slowly and hesitantly; hers was the unmistakable action of a person once again beginning to respond to the stir of life. But never during all of this did she lift her head or look at the artist. Her appearance continued to be that of one afraid.

In all these weeks, the artist had not spoken to Jane, but had trusted only in what he could say through his presence. Finally, one day when she was working the clay into rude shapes, he spoke her name softly, “Jane.” Her hands paused, her head came up slowly, and with caution she looked at him, the first person she had looked at for months. No one can really know what happened. between the artist and the girl at that moment as they looked at each other. A deep meeting was certainly taking place between them, because as time went on, Jane became less afraid and more trusting. But yet she did not speak, nor did she smile.

The lump of clay, however, had become a bond between them, and now the artist was helping her to work it into more complex shapes. She seemed to be trying to shape something that would not come. She became increasingly tense and irritable. Finally, she threw the clay down on the table where they were working and hit it angrily with her clenched fist, then she looked at him anxiously. He smiled at her, put his hand over her clenched and angry one. Wonderingly she 1ooked down at his hand on hers as both rested on the shapeless clay; gradually a faint smile softened the anxious hopelessness that had shown on her face for so many months. Reassured, they returned to their work and the artist said, “You see, Jane, I like you and believe in you, so that you don’t need to worry when things don’t go right.”

It was then that she spoke for the first time in months. Searching his face, she said wonderingly, “You like me?”

From this time on her progress was rapid. before long, Jane was able to talk to her doctors and little by little they were able to piece together the story of what led to her breakdown.

Jane’s parents had struggled to achieve the financial and social position that was theirs. And they had had great hopes and plans for their older daughter. They loved her, but their anxiety for her to excel in popularity and accomplishment had made her feel that she would be loved only so long as she continued to meet their expectation. Love was not free, she felt. She had

to buy it, to earn it with good behavior and with achievement in those areas that were important to the people to whom she looked for love.

When she approached marriage, she brought with her the same concept of love. But she was so emotionally exhausted from her efforts to meet the demands of love as she understood them, that she could not face the demands of the marriage love-relationship that lay ahead of her. Quite appropriately then, on the eve of her marriage, she fled from life and love and found refuge in illness.

It was then the unconditional love that the artist brought to her which renewed her life. He accepted her as she was. This often happened when Jesus Christ came into contact with a person.

God's love for us is that same kind of personal love. It cannot be earned but is freely given — no strings attached. When we love as God loves — an incredible power begins to work. All sorts of new possibilities are opened.

2. A second component of love is that it is also more than personal. Justice is a form of love. Sometimes the love of God and neighbor is transmitted through institutions. Christian love of God and neighbor is being practiced when a person uses his or her skills to work at providing jobs for the employed. This can be as much component of love as bringing a basket of food to someone who is hungry.

Many routine jobs because of what they contribute to the over-all purpose of the institution are a practice of love of God and neighbor. There is more to love than just doing something personally for someone else. Institutions can and need to be bearers of love as well as individuals.

3. Thirdly, our personal love of God and neighbor and our love that is more than personal need to be united. As individuals we are often decent and loving, but as groups or institutions we can be cruel, unjust, and unloving. We've all met people who are personally very loving and caring, but in other relationships can be downright mean. On the other hand, we've met people who are all for social justice and work hard on behalf of the poor but yet in their personal relationships are mean and nasty.

Which commandment is the first of all? You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. God's love is personal and more than personal and from God we have the power to make our love the same. Amen.