Sunday, October 24, 1982
LOVE IS A MANY SPLENDORED THING
Luke 10:25-37

What is our one responsibility as a Christian? Or which commandment is the first of all? When anyone asked Jesus this question, the answer he gave was always the same — "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, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." It sounds simple enough. Yet what does it mean to love God and to love one's neighbor? And as the lawyer asked Jesus, "just who is my neighbor?"

In answer to the lawyer's question, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. In so doing, the lawyer got an answer to two questions — what is the nature of Christian love, and who is my neighbor?

First then, let's look at this amazing word "love." Usually in our society, when we think or hear the word "love," we define it primarily in personal intimate term. We think of love as a relationship between two people or in a group of people such as a family. Love means being considerate and sensitive and caring toward another person.

Examples of personal love are many and varied. You are practicing Christian love if you personally take a basket of food to another individual or family who are hungry. You are practicing Christian love when you help a friend who is in need. You are practicing Christian love when you offer to babysit for a neighbor who needs to visit a family member in the hospital and can find no one to watch the child.

You are practicing Christian love when you visit a person who is lonely or someone who has no friends or family. You are practicing Christian love when you visit a person in a nursing home who is forgotten by almost everyone. You are practicing Christian love when a friend calls late at night and needs to talk with you. You are practicing Christian love when you visit a family where a loved one has died, and you seek to bring some comfort.

Christian love includes all kinds of personal relationships where one person is being kind and helping another. It may be something very brief where one person does not even know the name of the other person. This summer I had surgery with a local anesthetic. The nurse anesthetic treated me in a very loving way. During the surgery, she held my hand and talked with me in a quiet sensitive manner. I didn't know her name and will probably never see her again, but she did her job in a quiet loving, caring manner. It was impersonal, yet still very personal.

So Christian love certainly includes the caring and sensitivity that occurs between one person and another, and I'm all for it.

But there are other aspects of Christian love as taught and practiced by Jesus Christ that we often forget. "Love is a many splendored thing," as the song title puts it. To define love as only personal is to define it much too narrowly. If love is only personal, then we tend to condemn all those things we think of as impersonal, and there are some things in this world that cannot always be personal and intimate but are still needed and are good.

Furthermore, if we define Christian love as only being personal, something that one person does to another, then we have problems relating our Christian faith to much of our public life and to our everyday work. This is especially true in today's world where more and more people work in large organizations and as consumers and workers, we tend to deal more and more with institutions rather than individuals.

We no longer go to a shoe shop and have one shoe-maker design and build us a pair of shoes. Nor do we go to a buggy maker and have a new buggy built by one person. Rarely do we even go to a grocery store in which the owner is also the person who waits on us, sacks our groceries and collects our money. Our shoes are made in a large factory and often in another country, as are most of the rest of our clothes and they are made by people who we do not know or see, each doing a specialized operation with a machine.

Then there are the market experts, the designers, the importers, the salespeople, the transportation network, the advertisers and a whole host of others who have a part in providing us with that pair of shoes or new dress. Each of these functions has to be coordinated and planned so that the whole system works together. The only person we might have a personal encounter with is the salesperson who sells us the shoes, and if we order from a catalog, we won't even have that.

More and more we live in a world of systems and institutions and procedures. This is not necessarily bad, it's just different. Of course, sometimes the system or the procedures get in the way, and it all seems very complicated.

One day while on an airplane, I noticed that a stewardess had given one of her fingers a nasty cut because of a sharp piece of metal in the galley. She tended the wound with such make-shift devices as a rolled napkin and the direct application of ice. I asked her if she needed a band-aid. She indicated that she would be grateful for one. I fished in my brief case and happened to find one and gave it to her. All the while I was wondering why it fell to a passenger to provide a band-aid for someone in flight. She answered my question, "We have a first-aid kit on board, but if I open it, even for a band-aid, I have to fill out a long form." She didn't want to bother with all the procedures.

In our kind of society, institutions and systems with their procedures are necessary and some of our living is impersonal. We all feel it. There is nothing very personal about a traffic jam, or an office conference, or a laboratory experiment, or a hurried visit to the supermarket, or to the hospital emergency room. In such situations, the people we meet hopefully are polite and friendly, but it's not the time to establish personal one to one relationships or lifelong friendships. We are caught up in the movement of the institutions and there's a certain impersonality that is present.

The problem we face as Christians is — how is Christian love to be carried on where much of our life is impersonal?

Some people react negatively and become pessimistic about modern society with its procedures and technology. Because love is only understood as something personal and intimate, the world of systems, cities, institutions and the technology that makes it all possible are seen as threats. But again, I think it's because we define love too narrowly.

Let's then look at this broader definition of love as it is described in the New Testament.

To begin with, the New Testament repeatedly describes the love of neighbor as a readiness to serve others in their particular situation; a readiness to serve others in their particular situation; a readiness to help others with their particular problems; to do good for them in the face of their specific need. And of course, the word neighbor as Jesus defined it, means anyone anywhere who is in some kind of need.

So Christian love involves an effort to do what is best for the other; to use the most satisfactory resources and to do so in the most effective way. There is no hint that only personal resources should be used, or that the help be given in such a way that might occasion a personal encounter of some sort. That may be the least of what a person needs at the time.

Thus, there is as much Christian love being practiced, or perhaps even more, if a person uses his or her skills to work at providing jobs for the unemployed as there is in bringing baskets of good to a family which is hungry because the mother or the father or both are unemployed. Working to provide jobs may not bring a person into some kind of direct or personal relationship with those who are out of work. But that does not make it any less an act of Christian love.

In the story of the good Samaritan which we read as our scripture lesson this morning, there is no hint of personal encounter. There is simply the emphasis on the Samaritan's astonishing liberality. The emphasis is on his readiness to act in the best way possible no matter who the victim.

In fact, in that day, the Samaritans and the Jews had no dealings with each other. This is part of what makes this parable so significant. The Samaritan saw a Jew in need, and he served that need to the best of his ability.

No doubt, like the other Samaritans of the day, this one didn't particularly care for Jews and did his best to avoid dealing with them in any way, and the inured Jew in the ditch didn't like Samaritans. Christian love, however, is not dependent on likes and dislikes. God doesn't command us to like all people or to have a close personal relationship with all people. But God does command us to treat all people with dignity and justice and to be of help to anyone in time of need.

Thus, the Samaritan aided the man in the ditch because it was the right and responsible thing to do. He didn't take him to his home, rather he took the man to the next town, saw that he was adequately cared for and the left money for his continued care and the Samaritan continued on his way.

Now let's take another step. Suppose the Samaritan came upon the wounded man and took him to the inn and cared for him and then came the next day and found another man in the same condition and dealt again with his wounds in the same way. Then suppose on the next day and the next he met wounded travelers at the same place along the road and that he helped and cared for each of them. Suppose this went on for weeks. Would we not think there was something deficient in his practice of Christian love if he never thought to ask who was patrolling that road against bandits? Suppose he were a person of power and influence in the community. Would there not be something deficient in his practice of Christian love if he never thought to use that power and influence to prevent attacks on travelers?

What is a servant of God would give his last bread to a starving stranger in a bread line, yet never think to ask questions about the economic conditions that cause the bread line to exist?

We might stop to help a motorist who had an accident. But we are also practicing Christian love in the best sense of the word when we work for safer highways, better driver education, safer cars and efficient hospitals to which the injured can be taken. All of this may not be as direct or intimate or personal, but it is still love.

We are also carrying out the love of neighbor which Jesus talked about when we work to have the best police force possible, the best health education, good courts of law, and just government. Justice is always a form of love. We are just being loving people when we work against discrimination of any kind.

Impersonal work can also be an act of love. The hospital worker whose job it is to antiseptically clean the rooms and the equipment to prevent the spread of infection is practicing love as much as the surgeon or nurse who comes into direct contact with the patient.

Thus, the impersonal world of technology can be a perfectly legitimate form of Christian love and service. Laboratories that analyze genetic structures, corporations that produce useful products, persons who work in almost any kind of position can be practicing love of neighbor.

The agricultural researcher who discovers or contributes to the discovery of some new way of raising vital food on a large scale in a country like India, may do more through technology to alleviate starvation than thousands of persons sending baskets of food. Or think of the suffering that has been prevented because of the research which has produced the various kinds of vaccines. Those involved in such research are doing the work of love as much as those who personally care for the sick.

In our kind of world, we cannot expect to deal with everyone we meet on an intimate personal level. We will often confront individuals in the world of their corporate or professional responsibilities and we are acting out love of neighbor when we do our job well.

Love and service are not limited to personal relationships. Love is a many splendored thing. The love of God and the love of neighbor are practiced and spread in many ways. Amen.