

# The Theology of Peace: Love

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In the time that I have been working at the peace center, I have become very familiar with the phrase "Anabaptist Peace Theology." It has been tossed about in board meetings and appeared in literature. We have even bemoaned the fact that many Mennonite churches have abandoned Anabaptist Peace Theology in favor of a more mainstream evangelical faith, leaving behind the Mennonite Church's traditional peace stance. One of our goals is to reach out to these churches to try and reinvigorate their commitment to peacemaking. But trying to actually figure out what that might look like is problematic. How do we engage them in a way that is effective? One possibility is to steep ourselves in scripture so that we can give them evidence of Christ's primary call to peacemaking. But that could just lead to each side quoting scripture at one another. In order to avoid this kind of exchange, we need to return to basics. No doubt that the Sermon on the Mount is essential to understanding who Jesus was and what our lives are to look like as followers of Christ. But today's scripture reveals an even more basic starting point, loving God and loving others.

We are used to a lot of rules and sets of ethics. Ways we should behave and conduct our daily lives. We have business ethics for how to conduct our business affairs. There are laws that govern how we interact with the rest of society. They are useful and help keep order. They tell us how we should drive, spend our money, buy our houses, and carryout our professions. There are rules in our families; such as what time kids go to bed or whether shoes are worn in the house. There were rules in Jesus time as well. Some scholars estimate that there were as many as 600 different rules in the Torah. These rules help to shape Jewish life. In our passage today, however, the scribe who approached Jesus wasn't concerned about the rules for dress or for who can worship in the temple. He wanted to know what Jesus thought the most important commandment of all was. The one law from which springs all other laws. In response Jesus gives not only the command that there is one God and we are to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, but also the second command to love neighbor as self. These were not new teachings. The first comes from Deuteronomy 6:4, just one chapter after God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. The second comes from Leviticus 19:18, another part of the Torah. The scribe no doubt was familiar with both these passages. What was new

was the way that Jesus brought them together. This is thought to be the first time that these two traditional laws were combined in such a way. This new creation from old is fitting with Jesus' claim not to come to destroy the law but to fulfill it. But what does this combination add to our understanding?

#### 1. God above all others

The passage in Mark comes in the midst of several confrontations between Jesus and the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, who are examining his views on everything from paying taxes to resurrection. All of this is part of the final showdown. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, hailed as king, and has begun to directly challenge the religious authorities and to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God. In his response to the scribe, he is using the devices of the Pharisees and Sadducees – the law – against them. He is directly challenging their authority to run the temple and to govern the spiritual life of Israel. Jesus is telling us, in the words of the Psalmist, not to put our trust in princes and mortals. Rather we are to call upon God. Notice here that it does not say “do not put your trust in Republicans” or “do not follow Democrats”. Ultimate authority lies solely with God. Jesus echoes this psalm by emphasizing that God is above all others. Too often, especially for us in Washington, we get distracted by politics. We concentrate on lobbying for this or that bill that we are certain will make all the difference. We try to elect candidates we are certain will change things for the better. But despite all the good that politics and government can do to help order our lives for the better, they still fall woefully short. We forget that it is God who feeds the hungry, God who brings justice for the oppressed. We must always be mindful that God reigns above these imperfect and fallen human institutions, no matter how much good we think they do.

#### 2. Heart and Mind and Soul and Strength

Let's move now to the second part of the first commandment, loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength. On the surface, this seems to be a pretty tall order. Loving with the heart seems simple enough. We express this through our worship of God here every Sunday. So at least for this week we are all safe. But is this enough? Do we need to worship God in other ways and at other times than just Sunday morning? I want to differentiate a bit between what I am describing as

worship and what we mean when we use the phrase “work and worship are one.” I don’t disagree with this, but for the purposes of this commandment, work falls elsewhere. Worship in this instance refers to the direct connection between the believer and God in which we express our awe, our gratitude, and our longing. This can happen in a traditional worship service, in prayer, or in singing or listening to music. Worship does not have to be limited to just Sunday morning. We need to take time during our week as well, in the midst of our busyness, to listen for God and to worship God as an expression of our Love and a reminder of God’s love for us.

So if we love God with our hearts through worship, how do we express love with our minds? In short, by learning. Our desire to want to know more about God is an expression of love. Intentional scriptural study is an essential part of this. But it is not the only part. God is in the world that is all around us as well. As we seek to learn about the rain forest, or human psychology, or how to speak Spanish, we learn a little more about God as well. As we learn, we must also listen. Listening for the voice of God challenges our preconceived notions and prejudices and helps us to learn, enriching our minds and deepening our love for God.

So we love God with heart and mind, but how do we use our soul to love? The concept of soul is a little harder to grasp. In religion we think of the soul as something that goes to heaven after we die. Sometimes the word spirit is used in its place. Regardless of where it goes or where it comes from or what it’s called, it is the same thing in all of us. The soul is the deepest, most personal part of a person. The soul is who you are at your most basic level. It forms and shapes your identity. So, in this case, to love with your soul means to love God with who you are. This love reaches so deep into our being that it forms our inner core and influences every aspect of our personality. Our faith and Love of God then define who we are.

So given that we are defined by our love of God, and as a result we love with our hearts and minds as well, it follows that we should love God with our strength. This is where works enters into the equation. Loving God with our strength is God’s love in action. Through us, others can experience a little bit of the love of God. In addition, we can express our love of God through our service to others. This is exhibited through our care for God’s creation and for those created in God’s image.

So we have all four parts, heart, mind, soul, and strength. But it is easy to lose sight of the larger picture this commandment is trying to paint for us. This is not some laundry list of how we should love and in what ways we should love and what the right and wrong ways of loving are. Rather, this is a call to bring God into all areas of our life. All four of these areas flow into one another, forming a unified whole that is much greater than just the sum of its parts. It is not enough to sit down and take an inventory of how we loved God today. Our love for God should pervade our every breath. If we truly love God with our souls, then it becomes a part of who we are. Actions of love just happen, driven innately from within rather than trying to figure out how we can fit yet another good deed into our busy schedules. Worship should flow from us like a river. Loving God with the total self is a high calling, one that we are all seeking to fulfill. But fulfilling it, or the struggle to do so, is what drives us as God's children and followers of Christ.

### 3. Love your neighbor

Let's move to the second section of the Great Commandment now. Loving our neighbors is perhaps the easiest part for us at Hyattsville to understand. We host the homeless with Warm Nights, a number of us work for non-profits like Sojourners, Hope and a Home, CITI, and many, many others. We eat organic food, drive hybrid cars, and recycle our trash to help the environment. We host an international craft sale to help artisans in developing countries. We even drive four hours to help a sister congregation build a house for someone in need. So if there is a church that understands what loving your neighbor means, it is Hyattsville. Or so we think. If we look at the version of this passage in Luke, it is particularly helpful in trying to understand exactly what loving our neighbor entails. When the Great Commandment is enjoined, the question is asked of Jesus "who is my neighbor?" Jesus then proceeds to tell the story of the Good Samaritan. A man is beaten and robbed on the road to Jericho from Jerusalem. The priest and the Levite pass by, perhaps averting their eyes to avoid seeing the suffering that this man is in. A Samaritan comes upon the scene and takes mercy on the man, binds up his wounds, and takes care of him. Jesus asks, "Who was a neighbor to the man?" The answer; the Samaritan, a group of people despised by Jews as beneath them. We have always taken this to mean that everyone we meet is our neighbor, and we must show love toward them. But "everyone" is a vague and faceless group. What is

important to remember is that “everyone” includes those whom we most despise, not just those who we help because they are in need. Imagine being told that the person you should emulate is someone that you think you are vastly superior to. You may think you are smarter than them, have a better understanding of scripture, or maybe are just more humble and Christ-like than they are. Now, make the next logical step from, “you should be like them”, to “you should love them”. We may not need much help in being neighbors to those in need, but we must continue to strive to love those who drive us crazy or make us angry; our co-workers, the religious right, our conference, maybe even somebody sitting in one of these pews this morning. This does not mean that we don’t disagree, argue with, or even get angry with these people. Rather, loving them means that we keep in mind our common humanity with them, we show compassion towards them whether or not we think they deserve it, and we cease demonizing them in such a way that it becomes easier to hate.

#### 4. The significance of the combination

The combination of these two directives, loving God and neighbor, comprises the great commandment. These two are cited as the most important, above all other laws and sacrifices. If that is truly the case, then we have fallen victim as well to being too focused on the rules from time to time and less focused on what lies at the heart of those rules. In many ways, the Sermon on the Mount is not much more than a list of commandments for Christians to follow. Like the Old Testament laws, these new rules brought by Christ help us discern what is right and what is wrong in our daily lives. They guide the decisions we make and how we interact with those around us. But to truly understand what it means to be followers of Christ, we must move beyond our “Sermon on the Mount” legalisms and flow back to the origin of these words. The Great Commandment enables us to go deep and understand more fully the things that Christ taught in the Sermon on the Mount. In addition, it provides continuity between faith and practice that might sometimes be lost. Theologian Halford E. Lucock rightly points out that when love of neighbor has become a real experience, the love of God has been lifted up from confining walls, and filled with ethical and spiritual content. We do these things ostensibly because it is the example that Christ has put before us. While this is good and right, it is not enough. We are no more devout than the scribes and Pharisees if our focus is on

making sure we do the right things. Doing good is necessary and it is right, but it is not an end in itself. The ultimate worth of loving our neighbor is that it is a real and practical expression of our love of God as well. Love is the great unifier in life. This is truly what Anabaptist Peace Theology is about and what being Christian is about as well. The interconnectedness of our personal faith, our love of God, our desire to follow Christ, and our call to serve those around us, be they neighbor or enemy.