

*I sought my soul. My soul I could not see.*

*I sought my God. My God eluded me.*

*I sought my neighbor and found all three.*

In the days of the American Revolutionary war,

Rev. Peter Miller was

an admired teacher and pastor,

and a personal friend of George Washington.

He held forth in the Cloisters of Ephrata,

in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

Also in Ephrata lived a certain Michael Widman,

an ill-tempered man

who often confronted Rev. Miller.

Widman was a British loyalist secretly.

In a court-martial,

Widman was convicted of treason

against the colonies and sentenced to hang.

To everyone's surprise his adversary, Rev. Miller,

walked from Ephrata to Mt. Vernon –70 miles –

to appeal to Gen. Washington for Widman's life.

Hearing the facts as Miller presented them,

Washington said, "No, Peter,

I cannot grant the life of your friend."

The preacher corrected the General.

"My friend!?"

Widman is the bitterest enemy I have!"

"That puts the matter in a different light,"

replied Washington,

his eyes moistening with tears.

"You have walked 70 miles to save

the life of your enemy! I will grant the pardon."

And he did.

Miller and Widman walked back together,

as neighbors.

Loving is central to Jesus' life and teachings.

In his sermon on the Mount, Jesus preaches,

"Love your enemies

and pray for those who persecute you."

That passage, and our lesson today,

are Jesus' main teachings

about the love we are to have for one another.

He sets an extraordinarily high standard of love.

Life throws up barriers to the kind of love

that Jesus elevates to a primary commandment.

Such love is rare, compared with hatred and fear.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

The section of Matthew's gospel in which our

lesson appears is the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem.

After a triumphal entry, Jesus goes to the Temple

and overturns the tables of the money-changers.

Money facilitated the offering of animal sacrifices.

Under Roman occupation,

temple worship had devolved

into obligatory compliance with Moses' law,

an empty tradition.

Only by strict compliance with ritual, it was said,

could the chaos that threatened Jewish culture

be held in check.

That's why Jesus' overturning the tables

of moneychangers in the Temple is so dramatic.

The Pharisees are the chaos-chasers of their day.

Taking every command in Scripture literally,

they go looking for breaches of God's holy order.

These guardians of good order

are on the lookout for Jesus.

He provides them plenty of opportunities.

Another group, the Sadducees,

are the Sophisticated Religious.

Sadducees differ from Pharisees

in not believing in life after death.

They have just asked Jesus, cynically,

a question about marriage after death

to demonstrate resurrection's absurdity.

Jesus smashes the Sadducee's question.

"The kingdom of God displaces marriage rules.

Men and women are equal,  
with or without marriage."  
The idea draws gasps, even from Jesus' admirers.  
The Sophisticated Religious slither away.  
Enter the Pharisees, the Seriously Religious.  
They are good at their game.  
They know all 613 laws and commandments and  
they're sure every one of them matters, equally.  
Hearing that Jesus has muzzled the Sadducees,  
the Pharisees send their lawyer to entrap him.  
It will be a double-victory if they can best the man  
who bested their opponents.  
The windup begins with some old-style flattery:  
"Teacher, tell us,  
which kind of Jewish law is most important?"  
This isn't a philosophical discussion-starter.  
This is a trap.  
If Jesus answers with any particular law,  
he will be exposed as a non-observant Jew.  
If he fails to respond,  
he will be exposed as a shallow teacher.  
Uncharacteristically, as the Gospels go,  
Jesus answers the question directly.  
"You shall love the Lord your God wholeheartedly,  
with all your soul and with all your mind."  
Except for the last word (mind),  
this is a direct quote of the ancient  
Hebrew daily prayer, the Shema.  
Observant Jews still pray this morning and night.  
The traditional Shema ends,  
"with all your might."  
In a change also recorded in the gospels of Mark  
and Luke, Jesus substitutes "mind" for might –  
brain for brawn:  
"You shall love the Lord your God  
(not my God, but our God)  
with all your intellect, imagination, and reason,

and sensory perception –  
all the traits that make you human."  
"This is the greatest and first commandment."  
Now, the Hard Part:  
"The commandment next to it is similar:  
"Love your neighbor as yourself."  
The verb is "agapeo," in both verses.  
Some call Jesus' summary of the law and  
the prophets the Double-Love Command.  
Jesus' Double-Love Command manages  
to divide some Christians instead of uniting  
them.  
Some argue that love of God is most important.  
That's an evangelical Christian message.  
Others claim that love of neighbor is most  
important.  
That's a social-progressive Christian message.  
But the Coming Kingdom is about  
loving God and loving neighbor.  
The spiritual and social agendas are  
perpendicular  
and locked together.  
Let's look at each one a little more closely:  
[Love the Lord your God with all your heart . . .](#)  
Loving God seems to be easiest  
when we perceive that God is loving us.  
When things are working for us, God is good.  
Now, the Hard Part, when bad things happen...  
... at my cancer diagnosis.  
Can I still love God? God still loves me.  
... when my child is still-born.  
Can I still love God? God still loves me.  
... through the haze of addiction.  
Can I still love God? God still loves me.  
Now, the Really Hard Part.  
Jesus is quoted three times in Matthew's gospel  
saying, [Love your neighbor as yourself](#).

In a sense, we are to love in two dimensions, vertical and horizontal. Think of the two pieces of the cross. Here’s a paraphrase of the Double-Love Command: *Love the God who loves you; cherish the person who meets you.* Agape love is to be very particular, not general. Karl Marx, it is said, loved the Working Class but couldn’t tolerate particular laborers. I may say I love the poor but not tolerate particular beggars. Is that loving my neighbor as myself? I don’t hate beggars. I just avoid them. The greatest barrier to loving my neighbor is not hatred, but fear, or perhaps indifference. The modern accounting concept of “Goodwill” offers a parallel to loving-neighbor-loving-self. In accounting, goodwill is the intangible value that accrues to an enterprise from its market behavior over time. Fair market practices and good employee relations are behaviors that contribute to goodwill. The relatively low costs incurred in those activities are far less than the increased goodwill value. Goodwill is the economic cousin of agape love. The passage from which Jesus quotes is in Leviticus; it speaks about maintaining goodwill. Leviticus calls for one neighbor to refrain from anger and revenge at another, for example. Neighbor-love can be tough-love, at times. The same passage requires one to scold or correct a neighbor if a situation warrants. Love-of-neighbor, like goodwill, is not measured by degree of internal effort. It is measured by the judgments of the beholder. Now the Hard Part:

Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Many Christians ride the band-wagon of self-esteem, love of self. ‘You can’t love others if you don’t first love yourself.’ Loving oneself is more fundamental than self-respect. Lack of self-respect in itself doesn’t prohibit a person from loving others. Brenda is an adult survivor of childhood abuse. She succumbs to self-destructive behaviors. She is a serial wife of abusive husbands. She doesn’t love herself very much or very often. And yet, Brenda is a loving mother and friend. She expresses love because she has felt God’s love. Love is a consequence of knowing, deep down, that God loves you. God always loves you, even if you don’t. True self-love is not self-willed. Self-love is a response, not an initiative from within. Self-love is not a prerequisite for God’s loving us. Nor is self-love a condition for us to love others. We love others because God loves us. ‘Loving our neighbors as we love ourselves’ is the command to use our imaginations, a command that balances the rational ‘loving God with heart and mind.’ The capital-G Gospel is that God’s love for you is always greater than your love for God. God’s love is unconditional. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son ...” (1 Jn 4:10) The Double-Love Command is mistakenly touted as a means of grace. By that is meant that a special place in the Kingdom of God is reserved for people

who are altruistic, caring, and generous. The flaw in this idea is the assumption that we can summon up altruism, care, and generosity, as innate gifts waiting to be expressed. One of the best things about our tradition is that Scripture portrays human nature realistically. Rarely do ordinary men and women in scripture display innate altruism, care, or generosity. The ones who do, like the caring prophet Elijah, the selfless widow Ruth, the trusting prophet Daniel, or the noble queen, Esther, act so lovingly out of a grateful and trusting response to God’s love. For that matter, the loving character of Jesus is attributed to the Holy Spirit at work in him, not because Jesus is a hunka-hunka holy love. The love that God commands – agape, the warm regard for and interest in another – is not an emotion to be summoned from within, but an ethic of respect to be learned and applied. From agape flow the fruits of love, such as joy, affection, loyalty, and honor. The Double-Love Command (upward and outward) is viable only because God first shows agape to us and, in the Christ, shows us how agape behaves.

**CONCLUSION**

Humans are not meant to function fully in isolation. We are designed by God for community, the kind of community-in-agape that Jesus perpetuates everywhere he ministers. Jesus never meets a stranger.

Jesus Immanuel, God with Us, keeps expanding the definition of who is our neighbor, out – and out still further. He teaches that all people are Children of God. For Jesus, God is the prime reality of life. God towers above nation, above death, above all other human responsibilities. As the classic catechism says, *Humanity's chief and highest end is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.* They’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our agape. George Washington showed Rev. Miller agape love because Miller showed his enemy agape love. Imagine if politics today hung from the twin pegs of agape love: Love of God + love of neighbor. God is smashing through chaos to change history. Will we surrender to the deepest force in the universe, love? Can we let ourselves be formed, reformed, and transform by a holy, cross-shaped love that has no room for hatred? We are made to love one another and to love ourselves. That’s the Hard Part. Amen.