

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 found out to be a British loyalist. 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, neighbors. *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.* 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, combined with our lesson today, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” are Jesus’ main teachings about the love we are to have for one another. That’s an extraordinarily high standard of loving.

Life throws up many barriers to the level of love that Jesus proclaims as a primary commandment. Such love is rare, compared with hatred and fear. The section of Matthew’s gospel in which our lesson appears is what we call the Passion Narrative. After a triumphal entry, Jesus goes to the Temple and overturns the tables of the money-changers. Under the priesthood during Roman occupation, temple worship had been reduced to an act of obligatory compliance, an empty tradition. Yet only by obligatory compliance, 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. As guardians of good order, Seriously Religious, the Pharisees are on the lookout for Jesus. He provides them plenty of opportunities. Another learned group, the Sadducees, might be called 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 prove their low opinion of resurrection’s likelihood. Jesus smashes the Sadducee’s proof. “The kingdom of God displaces marriage rules. “In heaven, men and women are equal,” explains Jesus, “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’ve mastered not only the Ten Commandments, but also the 613 laws that derive from the Ten. And every one of them matters.

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 religious competitors. The windup begins with some old-style flattery: “Teacher, tell us if you please, which commandment is most important in the law?” This isn’t a serious philosophical question; it’s a trap. If Jesus answers with any particular commandment, he will be exposed as a non-observant Jew. But if he fails to respond to the question, he will be exposed as a shallow teacher. Uncharacteristically, as 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 Hebrew daily prayer, called the Shema. Observant Jews still pray this morning and night. The traditional Shema ends, “with all your might.” In an improvisation also picked up in the gospels of Mark and Luke, Jesus substitutes “mind” for might – brain for brawn: “You shall love the Lord your God completely with your mind: your intellect, your imagination, your reason, and your 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.” Some call Jesus’ summary of ‘the law and the prophets’ the Double-Love Command. This 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, like two pieces of a cross. Here’s an easy way to remember the Double-Love Command: ‘Love the God who loves you; and 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 beggars. Is that loving my neighbor as myself? No, it’s not loving but fearing my neighbor. The greatest barrier to loving my neighbor is not hatred, but fear, or its cousin, 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 corporate behavior over time. Fair market practices and good employee relations are behaviors that contribute to goodwill. The relatively low costs incurred in those activities generate a large increase in the value of goodwill. Goodwill is the economic analog of agape love. Let’s look at the two parts of Double-Love. (1) 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. The hard part of loving God is 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 Hard Part.
 (2) Jesus is quoted three times in Matthew’s gospel saying, “[Love your neighbor as yourself.](#)”
 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 Leviticus passage requires one to scold or correct a neighbor if a situation warrants.
 Love-of-neighbor, like corporate goodwill, is not measured by the level of internal effort.
 It is measured by the judgments of the beholder.
 Now the Really Hard Part:
 Love your neighbor as you love [yourself](#).
 Many Christians these days ride the band-wagon of self-esteem, love of self.
 ‘You can’t love others if you don’t first love yourself.’
[Loving](#) oneself, it is said, is more worthy than respecting oneself, because lack of self-respect gets in the way of 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.
 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.
 Unlike self-respect, self-love is not a pre-condition for loving others.
 We love others [because](#) God loves us.

Loving our neighbors the way we we love ourselves is a command to imagine how God would love, 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 not to be thought of as a means of grace.
 By that I mean that a special status in the Kingdom of God is not reserved for people who are altruistic, caring, and loving. The flaw in the idea is the assumption that altruism, care, or love are innate abilities, just waiting to be expressed.
 I’ve tried to summon love; it’s phony. Scripture portrays human nature realistically. Rarely do ordinary men and women in scripture display innate altruism, care, or love. The ones who do, like the caring prophet Elijah, the selfless widow Ruth, the trusting prophet Daniel, or the noble queen, Esther, act lovingly out of a grateful and trusting response to God’s love. For that matter, the loving character of Jesus is brought about by 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 from God and applied in our relationships with one another. From agape also come the fruits of love, such as joy, affection, loyalty, and honor. The cross-like 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.

Human beings are not created by God
to fully function 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.

God with Us, Immanuel, keeps expanding
the definition of who is our neighbor
outward – 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 honored Rev. Miller
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 transformed by a holy, cross-shaped love
that has no room for hatred?

We are made to love one another
the same way we love ourselves.

I sought my soul . . . I sought my God . . .

I sought my neighbor and found all three.

Amen.