

Jon Hauerwas – “Love of Neighbor” – February 19, 2017
Leviticus 9:1-2, 9-18 and Matthew 5:38-48

When many people speak about the Old and New Testaments, they often present these texts as if they were in opposition to one another. They argue that the God of the New Testament seems personal and loving while the God of the Old Testament is wrathful and distant. This, of course, is a grave distortion.

Just look again at our first lesson this morning from the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Here God’s people are instructed to allow the poor and foreigners to glean part of their harvest. They are commanded not to steal, or lie, or deceive one another. “Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him,” the text continues. “Do not hold back the wages” of those you have hired.

Treat the disabled with respect. “Do not pervert justice” or show partiality or favoritism, but “judge your neighbor fairly.” Do not slander or harm your neighbor in any way. Do not hate your brother or seek revenge but “love your neighbor as yourself.”

To me, these instructions sound a great deal like the Ten Commandments, which Jesus condensed into these two: love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the positive

way, of course, of saying exactly what these “do not” and “thou shall not’s” really intend.

And, if we are to look at this from a marketing perspective, it seems as if Jesus was connecting a positive feeling and emotion with this faith that we claim as our own. To put it differently, he was providing a bridge between the heart and the mind. And he was leading people to look at God’s law not as a list of rigid prohibitions, but rather, as an affirmation of the love that God shows for us, and of our rightful response to that love in the creation around us.

As you are well aware, those who produce goods for mass distribution have long tried to connect their products to a certain image or feeling. James Bennet once wrote an article about this trend in the *Atlantic*. He claims that throughout the 20th century, businesses began to realize that “they needed not merely to mark their product with a unique label but to imbue that label with a distinctive personality, or identity. And a brand became a kind of metaphor... an emotion or an idea... that defined an underlying product or service.” It is this emotion or idea, of course, that marketing companies hope to evoke among consumers. ¹

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-brand/308933/>. Accessed on February 19, 2017.

As Western capitalists, we understand the concept of branding very well. And today, I am asking you to consider this notion in relationship to the church. To ask: Who or what is leading us? What is of value in this place and in our lives? What will we say to others about what we believe? How will we say it? And how will others respond? What image do we embody? And what message are we communicating?

From a Christian perspective, if the answers do not ultimately focus on an invitation to love others and to live a life of servanthood, then we have clearly missed the point. In the gospel of John, for example, Jesus says: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Does this mean that Jesus laid down his life even for his enemies? Absolutely. Just remember the cross where Jesus was mocked by two criminals, one on his right and one on his left. In response, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Yes. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Jesus' call, his power, and his authority all come directly from the Father. And his purpose is nothing less than life-giving love. Thus, he compels us to consider the paradox of his words – that to fully love all of creation, he must give his life, which he is also able to take up once again.

I imagine that many of us have an emotional connection with God in Christ. And yet, from the very beginning, Jesus' image has been challenged and tested by controversy. If you remember, there was the scandal of his unwed mother, Mary, and the scandal of his own, hand-picked disciples who didn't seem to understand Jesus' message. Later on, there was the scandal of Judas Ischariot's betrayal and the scandal of Jesus' crucifixion. In time, history would tell of the scandal of the Crusades, and the scandal of colonization in Christ's name.

Indeed, throughout the centuries, the Jesus brand, if you will, has been tarnished by clergy sexual abuse scandals, televangelists caught in fraudulent, financial schemes, and radical, end-times preachers. The Jesus brand has been smeared by those who condoned slavery in the name of Christ, by skinheads and cross-burning Klansmen, and by seemingly faithful people who have excluded entire groups from positions of elected leadership. The Jesus brand has been undermined

by state-sponsored religion and by politicians who choose to invoke God's name in support of their own, partisan agendas.

Yes. From start to finish, the Jesus brand has faced a series of challenges of every kind. And yet, year after year, the Bible remains the best-selling book in the world. What accounts for the popularity of this message? A message of forgiveness, repentance, faith, hope, and love. Why does the person of Jesus continue to enjoy such broad appeal, despite all of the controversy?

Because, in the end, this brand is built entirely upon the character, and the teachings, and the chosen-ness of Jesus Christ. And once we are convinced of his message, and his purpose, and his special relationship with God, then we simply feel compelled to follow. To entrust ourselves and our lives to the One who taught us, saying: love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you.

Jesus said: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

Friends, Jesus came to lead us in the way of life-giving love. And through that powerful experience of God's grace, we – as his servants – are inspired to respond in kind, laying down our own lives for others and the cause of Jesus Christ. For “this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for others.”

May it be so, and thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us stand and affirm our faith together.