

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself By Bishop George Khodr

This commandment ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth in fact is found in Leviticus of the Old Testament as such: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." (Lev. 19: 18); this can be interpreted to mean that you only love those of your own people. The New Testament broadened the meaning of that commandment by calling us to love all people. Yet the commandment is in the imperative revealing that love is a divine commandment and not only a sentiment; you might sense a feeling on the inside towards the other and you also might not do so. So "to love" is a law understood as such: you should love your neighbor as yourself. The underlying idea in the Old Testament is that those who love are tied together as the Law-Keepers forming together in this context the "Holy Nation"; the human-divine entity of the Jewish people.

Not so is the case in Christ. In Him one does not belong to a nation. By loving, we become the people of the "loved ones". So Jesus offered the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to the doctor of the law who asked him: Who is my neighbor? To this question, the Lord answered by another: Which was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The doctor said: He who has practiced mercy, Jesus said to him, and you also do likewise (Luke 10.9-37). He meant that every man remains a stranger if you do not take into consideration his pain and loneliness. Do not ask therefore about the one you show mercy to. Just have compassion generously and simply. He who is shown mercy by you is loved by you. And thus the "nation" of the beloved is built with love.

The Law of Moses presents loving as a command so that, in loving, one is not left to his own caprice and passion; for if one leaves this world with resentment and animosity to others, he separates himself from others and thus the ties of love in the Holy Nation are undone. And if you refuse to love someone, you would find yourself out of love; in the same way, you alienate God from the relation between you and your enemy if you do not love him as Jesus commands: "love your enemies". If you love your enemy you remove enmity from your heart and you might be and instrument in removing it from him; but in all cases you would bring him out of loneliness and alienation.

Since one's love for the other is a commandment, that means that it does not spring from the lovability of the person to be loved. The other might be ugly by all means; still you have to love him. You do not love the other because he deserves your love or because you expect him to reciprocate your love. He might have nothing to offer. Do not expect anything; sufficient is the grace that comes down on you from God to give you life; and that alone can change your desert into an oasis. If God is your sufficiency you will have the fullness of life whether you have others around you who share their love with you or whether you find yourself in the desert of love; in that desert, as Mauriac says, you also will enjoy fullness of life if you know that you are God's beloved.

The love of God saves us if we appropriate it as coming down on us personally and as sufficient for us in our lives. Sometimes we feel that the affection someone shows us is a reflection of the affection that God has for us; perhaps the ultimate value of emotional love is that it makes us feel God's fatherhood for us. God can be seen through everything that exists in

this world. The world is a great book. Blessed are those who manage to see God in what is around them.

If we explore the meaning of the commandment further, as Jesus wants us to, we find that the neighbor is he on whom we have mercy and serve till the end; and so love your neighbor as yourself would mean love your neighbor above yourself. It is ridiculous to say that the meaning of the commandment is to feed the neighbor in the same way you feed your own body. At times we have to deprive ourselves of food and clothing in order to give the other; that is the meaning of the commandment. Keeping a balance between what we have and what we give is not “love till the end”; the balance ascertains our existence for us while love might mean that we deny our existence so the other would live.

That commandment reaches its full dimension only with Him who loves all humans above himself that He gave himself to death, death on the cross. And because He preferred others above himself, He makes us understand the commandment as “love your neighbor above yourself”. You, having known the love God has for you in Jesus, have died or have “killed the world” in you so you do not feel that you exist in yourself but that Christ has called you to existence. And this new life in you, when imparted to another person, makes him live and exist after having been only meagerly existing. You should love the other regardless of his qualities whether good or bad. He might be ugly like Christ’s face was on the cross. You do not love the other because of any beauty in him. Anyway you should not gather him to yourself but to Jesus. You have no hold on him whom you love in Christ. He might be in need of you today but not so the next day. That could be for a long time or maybe for a short time only. Someone else might be in need of your mercy. For you, the ‘other’ is Jesus who said: “I was hungry and you gave me food”. Needless to say He was referring to those who are hungry and not to himself. Having a servant’s heart, you follow up on those you serve. You comfort, you feed, you clothe others and give them guidance; all this you do because you, for one reason or another, got to know about the need of the others, so you approach them and you pour out yourself for them.

Those whom you serve might be moved by the care you give them and give you back with heartfelt genuine affection. The problem here is that that might make you aware of your own importance as a “giver”. You should not let your service make you great in your own eyes or feel important. You should love with the only purpose that those you give would know that they are loved by God. If he pays you back your love, you would have received your reward. That is all right to happen but is not of importance. What is important in people loving one another is that they should get close to God in being drawn to Heaven above.

In fact when you give, you give to Christ Who dwells in the one who is needy. Christ is the ultimate and absolute poor who took nothing from the world except rejection. So you are with Him in all those who suffer. The one who loves and the one loved are one in Christ who, by giving His blood, disseminated all “giving” that ever springs from God’s heart. He, alone, who dwells in God can bring God to dwell in others. But if you make yourself dwell in others, you do not impart to others only what is good in you but also what is ugly. So you should impart only God and your faith in Him to others. I do not deny the joy there is in the exchange of affection between the hearts of people, for that is rewarding. But do not grasp on to the one you give to, because your goal is that he should turn his face to God’s face to thank Him; and so he will obtain Life.