

We Still Hate our Neighbor

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Hardly anyone today disagrees with the commandment to love your neighbor. It would be bad public relations to do so. Back when Jesus first gave this commandment, perhaps it was more controversial. In the first place, we know that he upset the scribes and the Pharisees when he placed this commandment right next to the greatest commandment. To link love of neighbor with ‘you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind’ would have been scandalous to them. Furthermore, at a time when people were divided by family or tribe, perhaps it was hard to trust outsiders who one knew nothing about. Much of history is filled with this mistrust. So, is it true that after all these centuries we’ve finally mastered the commandment to love one’s neighbor? I would say no. In fact, most of us still do hate our neighbor. We’ve just mastered the art of doing it implicitly.

A few examples from the first reading from the book of Exodus that get to the heart of how we really feel about our neighbors are how we treat aliens, widows, orphans, and the poor. Updating this terminology, we might say how do we treat the immigrant, those with only one source of income, those children without the stability of a family, and those who live in the bad parts of town. Do we really love these people as ourselves?

Another modern-day example of us implicitly hating our neighbor is mass incarceration. As Michelle Alexander says in her book, *The New*

Jim Crow, “criminals, it turns out, are the one social group in America we have permission to hate.” (176-7) We feel justified in our hatred of criminals because they are the ones who broke the law. They don’t deserve our love. Yet, as Alexander argues, the reason there are so many people in our prisons is not due to violent crime that needs to be punished, but largely due to non-violent drug charges based on racial discrimination. The criminal justice system and the ‘war on drugs’ have turned many people into felons. “Once labeled a felon,” she writes, “the badge of inferiority remains with you for the rest of your life, relegating you to a permanent second-class status.” (178) They will struggle to find a job and housing. They will have to pay fees they can’t afford before being able to vote. They will have the stigma of being dangerous. Do we love felons as ourselves?

These are just a few examples of how Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbor is much harder to do when faced with real life issues. We still hate our neighbors. As Christians, we have the obligation to take love of neighbor more seriously. We can do this by identifying the groups that we truly do feel hatred for, examining our own biases and prejudices, allowing the prophets to challenge us, making reparations, and working for true justice.

There is always more work to be done in regards to the commandment of love of neighbor.

The fact that there is much more work to be done shouldn’t discourage us. It should be our pleasure, for by loving our neighbor, we are only one step away from the greatest commandment to love God.