
Why We Need a Redundant Jesus

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
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I have so enjoyed reflecting on our gospel text this week. It is a text that is familiar and comforting. And yet because our sacred scriptures are living texts that we encounter differently each time we read them, I'll admit to finding this familiar text slightly puzzling this go-round.

Growing up, I remember learning that Jesus had basically improved upon Judaism by summarizing all the law and the prophets with these two commands: love God and love your neighbor. I learned that Jewish people were more preoccupied with the letter of the law, and that this preoccupation distracted them from what God was really all about: love. I learned that Jesus came to shine the light on this misguided focus on law, to show us a better way. And I learned that Christians, as followers of Jesus, got it right because we focused instead on the spirit of the law—which, again, is love. I learned all of this in a loving and inclusive faith community who did not mean to cast a shadow on Judaism, but who didn't understand Judaism well.

And so I can recall seasons of life when I would read today's gospel and think: Whoa. Jesus just flipped the script! Jesus is revolutionizing what it means to be in right relationship with God! This is a mic-drop moment for sure.

Only, Jesus wasn't saying anything revolutionary or even new. Jesus was quoting the Hebrew scriptures he had grown up with, verses every parent teaches their child in the Jewish tradition, verses recited every morning and every night.

Over the years, I have undone some of the learning I received as a child. I have taken classes and read books about Judaism, I studied Hebrew in seminary, but my real undoing has been born out of relationship.

It started with my Jewish friend Aaron teaching me how to tie the tefillin on my forehead and arm, binding myself with God's command to love. It continued when I moved to New York and discovered many of the city's rhythms were informed by the Jewish faithful, and where the parish I served shared space with a synagogue. It continues now, as I sit on the board of the Jewish preschool my children attended, the school that introduced meaningful sabbath practices into our home and taught our family to sing the "HaMotzi" at mealtime. A school whose name is the Hebrew word for love: Ahava.

These relationships have shaped my way of being in the world—and my way of being with God. Indeed that's what relationships do, when they are true. They transform us. They grow us. The more I sit with Jesus, I reflect on the life and teachings of this person who is one with God and the Holy Spirit, and I contemplate the holy undivided Trinity... the more capacity I have to love others and to see the beautiful dance of diversity and unity—the very character of God—unfold in community.

But the reverse is also true: the more I enter into true relationship with others love my neighbor like and unlike me... the more capacity I have to love God.

My relationship with God grows my ability to love others, and my relationship with others grows my ability to love God. The two are as inseparable as any one being of the Trinity.

So when the scribe asks Jesus, what is the greatest commandment, and Jesus answers with the most well-known scripture in all of Judaism, the shema: "*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,*"

and then follows up with passage from Leviticus, "*love your neighbor as yourself*," it's really no surprise that the scribe responds, "Right you are, Jesus!"

And that's what puzzles me this week, when I reflect on our gospel reading. Why the obvious answer, Jesus? What are you teaching your peers at the time this dialogue takes place, and what are you teaching us now? And why didn't anyone dare to ask Jesus any more questions after what was, frankly, a very ordinary response?

Two possibilities come to mind. The first is this: have you ever been in a situation where the person you believe is your arch nemesis takes the words right out of your mouth? A time when someone you love to hate says something you also hold to be true and dear? A time when you stumble upon common ground with someone you'd rather oppose? Those are highly teachable moments, are they not?

And while the scribe was not at odds with Jesus, this dialogue takes place in a larger dialogue among many faithful people trying to parse out what's right and wrong, and where Jesus stood during a contentious season among Jews and between the Jewish and Roman people. The questions leading up to this question were meant to test Jesus, maybe even trap Jesus. For Jesus to respond with something so obvious and so true would surely challenge some of the people present to recognize their common humanity and their common faith. Sometimes it's uncomfortable when you're poised to be defensive and find yourself delicately disarmed.

The second possibility is this: just because a teaching is obvious doesn't mean it's easy. Jesus can tell us to love God and love our neighbor every day, ten times a day... and we will need to hear it every time. We will need to remember to love God when it might be easier to love any number of things that make us comfortable: money, reputation, knowledge. We will need to remember to love our neighbor when our neighbor looks different, believes different, votes different. We will need to remember that it is in loving God that we are better able to love our neighbor, and that it is in loving our neighbor that we are better able to love God. This is why we need churches! Because loving God is never a solitary act.

So while I no longer read this passage and think Jesus has flipped the script, I do still think this is a mic-drop moment. Because we could ponder these two commandments all day long and still have something to learn. Thank you, Jesus, for being so patient and stubborn in your love for us to teach us to love God and our neighbor again, and again, and again, and again. Amen.