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Dear Friends,

Lawyers, Theologians, and Jesus At one point in Jesus' ministry a thoughtful, dedicated man asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment. There are so many different principles, rules, and priorities in the Bible, and he, I think wisely, used his brief time with Jesus to ask him, What matters most? (Some readers think the lawyer who asked this question was trying to trick Jesus by posing an impossible question, but, this time, let's distance ourselves from the prejudice of theologians about lawyers, and give him the benefit of the doubt.)

Now, if your child, or some other young person, junior colleague, intern, or student came up to you and asked you, "Of all that you know and have learned, what matters most?" What would you say?

When Jesus answers, he does not make up a new formulation, he does not turn a clever new phrase, he is neither original nor creative: Jesus just quotes the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). The thrust of his response is to remind his questioner of what he already knows, and, in effect he says, "You know this, now I want you to think about it and really take it seriously—don't just recite it by rote, but think about how you and your life would change if you actually took this, well, to heart."

And so, to the question of what matters most, Jesus replied with something like this:

What matters most is that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself. Everything else basically hangs on these two principles." (paraphrase of Matthew 22:37-40, with similar accounts in Mark 12:28-33 and Luke 10:25-27).

We quote this passage near the beginning of most Rite I Eucharist services (regrettably, the editors of the Rite II liturgy did not include this memorable and concise summary). In the Rite I service, this summary is followed by a short confession: Lord, have mercy upon us. Because, if we are honest, we know we have not loved God and our neighbor, and, because we think being honest about our failings is the first step towards recovery, healing, and becoming better, we don't pretend to be better than we are.

We do not say, for example, “By and large I’ve been reasonably attentive to you God. Of course there’s my family, my work, my other commitments, and I don’t want to seem like some sort of extremist with my nonreligious friends, but when it comes to religion, count me in with you. I try, within the reasonable limits of my situation, to be a good person and I’m nice to others when I can be, and certainly a lot nicer than some that you and I could both name.”

But look at the vocabulary Jesus uses: love...all...all...all...love. Jesus does not suggest balance, proportion, moderation, or checking in with God from time to time. To get our lives right requires an orientation of our whole character and identity towards the person and the will of God, and then the living out of that identity with ordinary people day to day. If we understand this expectation, and take it seriously, what else could we say but “Lord, have mercy.”

Why does this God-centered perspective matter most? Why do we need to devote *all* our heart, and *all* our soul, and *all* our mind? What happened to 10% being the standard God expects?

The Harvard Business School weighs in A recent *New Yorker* profile of a Harvard Business School professor quoted him as saying that it’s easier to do the right thing 100% of the time than 90%. When we set as our goal the shaping of our character, rather than the performance of external duties, we grow into being people who act with God by our new nature, not by rigorous discipline. The role, I think, of discipline is to shape character, not to prompt or prohibit specific acts. The goal is to become people who act according to the will of God from the heart, not from a check list carved in stone (or any other media...).

Why there’s a second commandment Without that second commandment about loving our neighbors, we might well think that God calls us to some sort of fanaticism. History and current events are unfortunately full of people of a wide variety of faiths doing what seem like fairly horrible things in the name of God. The second commandment puts a check on fanaticism and also requires the day-to-day application of the principles we espouse in the abstract. As the General Thanksgiving (BCP, p. 59) reminds us, we are to show our faith “not only with our lips, but in our lives.” As the author of 1 John (4:20) observes, if we make a big deal about loving God, whom we do not see, but cannot bring ourselves to love actual people whom we do encounter, then we are, in his word, “liars.”

But we start with loving God with all our heart, our soul, and mind. Which of these is easiest for you? Which is hardest? To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, if someone accused you of loving God with all your mind, would there be sufficient evidence to convict you?

I wonder if Jesus put the commandments in the order he did (and they appear in the opposite order in the Old Testament) because he suspected that it would only be by fully identifying with God that we could actually come to love our neighbors as ourselves.

How many lawyers does it take....When Luke tells this story (10:25-28) he sets up Jesus’ reply by having the lawyer ask, “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life.” Just tell me what to *do*. Don’t bother me with all this theology business and talk about “love” and “souls” (“heart” and “mind” I get, but what exactly is my “soul”?). All I want to know is what I am supposed to *do*. I haven’t got time for all these cryptic stories and unreasonable declarations. How can the poor be blessed and who in their right mind loves their enemy? I’ll come to a meeting, because we actually do something there, but don’t expect to see me in Church very often.

Jesus gives that lawyer the same answer we read above. What must you do? Love the Lord your God....and your neighbor as yourself. If we aim to orient our entire heart, soul, and mind to God, and intend to manifest that orientation in how we treat people, we will know what to do. If God gives us a set of do's and don'ts, we will always find a way to get around them, say they don't really apply in this situation, or argue that they are more to be thought of as symbolic ideals than norms of actual behavior.

To orient ourselves to God is, almost by definition, contrary to our nature (we are not God; God is not us) and requires constant and honest assessment of our performance (Lord, have mercy) and, for us to recover requires "true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of the Holy Spirit" (BCP, p. 42).

From Jesus to St. Elizabeth's So the first work of St. Elizabeth's is to foster in each of us that reorientation towards God, that loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind. That is the first and greatest purpose of this congregation. And the second is like unto it, that the parish might help us to live into our faith by showing it forth in daily life to our neighbors. (Believe me, you really don't want to try to spin this by asking, "Ah, but who actually is my 'neighbor'"? See Luke 10:29-37). The liturgy of the Episcopal Church is designed to engage and nurture the heart, soul, and mind. I think most of us get the "mind" part, but the liturgy is not a lecture. All that moving about—the kneeling, standing, and sitting is there for a purpose. So also is the singing—we sing to shape our souls, not to perform for our neighbors. For your soul to thrive, it needs you to sing. It really doesn't matter if you think you have an undistinguished, or worse, voice. You are not singing to show off, but to nurture your soul, and that goes for the canticles and chants as much as for the easy hymns. Sometimes we eat undistinguished cooking and are still very adequately nourished by it. Do not starve your soul just because you are not a choir soloist. Neuroscience is only about 2,000 years behind the Church in realizing that singing affects us in unique ways and can be a major contributor to health and wellbeing. (Be patient with the scientists, they've only been at this for a few centuries and all things considered they are doing remarkably well.)

I wish significant character formation could be done by investing an hour or two a month, but I see little evidence in the Church, or, for that matter, in just about any other significant endeavor, that such a modest investment ever produces a meaningful result. And this is where the discipline comes in. To become people who really get what matters most, and to have our character, identity, and very lives shaped for the better, we need to make our recovery our first priority.

God's offer and invitation is universal but the terms are not negotiable: everyone is invited, anyone may come, but the program actually is written in stone.

Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. BCP, p. 324

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