

HEALING AND FEELING
Sermon for Pentecost 14C—Lk 13:10-17
LPC, 8/25/13

I have heard the Bible Belt defined as that part of America where God speaks from billboards. You've probably seen some of these billboards. Some of them are actually not too bad. My favorite reads, "'That part about loving your neighbor? I meant that.' ~God."

For Christians, loving your neighbor, along with loving God, is where it's at, or at least where it's supposed to be at. Jesus himself says so: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and your neighbor as yourself."

This Summary of the Law is read at every Rite I Eucharist service and perhaps we Rite two-ers ought to hear it more often. In it Jesus likens love of neighbor to love of God, stating explicitly what he both teaches and models throughout the Gospels, which is that love of God is manifest in love of neighbor. To phrase this more bluntly, to pretend one loves God without demonstrating love of neighbor is, in fact, a lie. Specifically, to substitute following the letter of the law for loving one's neighbor is bogus.

This is exactly what is going on in today's Gospel lesson from Luke. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, when a crippled woman appears. Jesus interrupts his teaching to heal her. To the people around Jesus, this is scandalous on several counts.

Studying and discussing scripture was a high and holy occupation. It was not to be interrupted except in dire situations. Women in particular were admonished not to bother the men in their study of Torah. And on top of that it was a Sabbath, which was not to be profaned by work of any kind.

So the synagogue leader, a highly respected and holy individual, objects. And is roundly rebuked by Jesus. Jesus demonstrates that, on the contrary, no religious rule is to get in the way of loving neighbor.

I'd be surprised in anyone in this congregation would object to this. Most of us here have been hearing this teaching of Jesus all our lives. Love your neighbor. That's a no-brainer.

The difficulty is in figuring out how to love our neighbor.

Few of us, especially since as Episcopalians we are comfortable with an interpretative rather than a literal understanding of scripture, would let rules get in the way of loving our neighbor, although this does happen. Episcopalians have been known to be less than completely loving when their neighbor sits in their pew or wears flip-flops

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under his or her acolyte vestments. In some ways the unwritten rules pose more of an obstacle to neighbor-love than the written ones.

The issue of how to love is further complicated by our culture's understanding of love. I've preached on this before. Our culture tells us that love is a feeling. Love is romantic attraction, or love is the gut-felt devotion of parent to child, or love is what draws friends together. There's nothing wrong with these associations. But as Jesus teaches, there is more to love, or perhaps less.

Less? Yes, perhaps. Love as Jesus teaches is not a feeling. Jesus rarely talks about feelings. Feelings cannot be commanded. They happen, or they don't. Yet Jesus commands love. How do we produce love on command?

Again and again, Jesus shows us how to live out the commandment to love. This passage from Luke is an example. Love of neighbor is demonstrated in healing.

Simple, isn't it? Love is healing. Our entire ethic as Christians is based on healing. Moral choices for Christians are based on which alternative is healing. To love is to desire and work for the other's health, the other's wholeness. Warm fuzzy feelings may enhance the work of healing, but they are, in fact, optional.

If we're trying to decide between alternatives and want to make that decision as followers of Jesus, the "right" choice is the one that is most healing. Is it more healing to speak or to remain silent? Is it more healing to act or to wait?

These questions can be terribly complex to answer. An intervention for a person with addictions may cause violence to the relationship but be the most healing thing to do in the long run. And too, God's purpose is to heal all of creation. Individual health, in the short run, may take second place to the health of the whole. Some decisions are and will always be hard. But the standard remains healing, health and wholeness: in individuals, in relationships, in churches and other organizations, in culture.

Jesus helps us further by providing examples of what healing and wholeness look like: Healing looks like freedom. Jesus significantly tells the woman in today's story, "You are set free from your ailment."

This example provides insight into those cases where physical healing is not self-evident. I once knew a woman named Greta who was wheelchair-bound with progressive MS. She considered herself healed. She was completely at peace and free in spirit. Her kindness and serenity confirmed this. She was free; she was healed.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is particularly interested in preaching and demonstrating that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Jesus then shows what the Kingdom of heaven is like: Heaven is a place of healing and freedom. We participate in heaven on earth when we participate in healing actions here on earth.

In this is love: not feeling, but healing.