

Sermon: An Axiom of Theology

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46**

An axiom is a self-evident principle, truth, or law.

In 1933, just as Hitler and Nazism took root in Germany, Karl Barth, the great Swiss Protestant theologian, called the First Commandment an axiom of theology, and that axiom is ‘You shall have no other gods but me.’ For Barth, the First Commandment was also a political theology. He wrote:

“Today, the conflict in the Church is not over the Lord’s Supper but over the First Commandment, and we have to ‘confess.’”¹

Barth was one of the founders of the so-called Confessing Church, which reacted vigorously against the attempt to set up a “German Christian” church supported by the Nazi government.² He refused to take an oath of allegiance to Hitler and was forced to leave Germany in 1935. Later, he wrote that the Confessing Church did not understand that acknowledging the First Commandment:

“Under National Socialism is not just a ‘religious’ decision...It is in fact a political decision. It is a decision against a totalitarian state which as such cannot recognize any task, proclamation, or order other than its own, nor acknowledge any other God than itself.”³

The First Commandment overshadows everything we will talk about today.

We live in a complex world, a world which makes it difficult to be faithful to God. Actually, faith has never been a simple thing to hang onto. In every age, it’s hard to ignore the extremely attractive lure of personal power or of Mammon, the personified love of money, and its twin, covetousness. These distractions always promise more than they can deliver, and more people have fallen prey to them than we can say.

Sometimes, in the back of our head there is the thought that, yes, I claim obedience to the LORD, but alongside that I want to get mine.⁴

One thing that I think people sometimes do with Scripture is to pull a verse from over here and stitch it to another verse from over there to make something new. Sort of

like the way Germans invent new words. Jesus was masterful in how he did this. In today's Gospel reading, he took two verses – completely out of context – shortened one, put them together, and made a new Scripture out of it.

And he only did it because a Pharisee – a lawyer, of all people – came to test him.

Now, this lawyer was someone who was presumably well-versed in the Torah and all the other laws too, all 613 of them. So, we don't know if he had in mind the law about the negligently open pit or the one about someone's ox hurting the ox of another (Exodus 21:33, 35). Maybe he was thinking about the commandment about using honest weights (Leviticus 19:36).

But he did say 'which commandment *in the law*' is the greatest, so it's possible he was referring only to God's Ten Words. Either way, Jesus' answer goes beyond that.

First, he quoted from Deuteronomy nearly verbatim: 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your *heart*, and with all your *soul*, and with all your *mind* (6:5). That's the first and greatest commandment except Jesus changed *might* to *mind*. We'll allow it.

Then he took a piece of Leviticus 19:18, the part about loving your neighbor as yourself, and called that a second commandment *like* the first. Not identical to the first, but like it. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets, he said.

Interestingly, neither of these are part of God's Ten Words. Throughout Leviticus and Deuteronomy, Moses restated God's commandments either to expand them or to reinforce what had been previously commanded. But these two were not tablet-worthy.

In the original Hebrew, what is translated as *neighbor* meant, broadly speaking, all human beings who are of the Covenant, or, more specifically, your fellow Israelite, especially one with whom you share a reciprocal relationship. In the Gospels, most pointedly in the parable of the Samaritan who stopped to help, Jesus expanded on this definition of neighbor to include *everybody*.

We often struggle with his definition. Years ago, our daughter proudly told us what she had learned in Sunday School that day: "Do unto others as they did unto you."

It might be better if we thought of it in the way Rabbi Hillel the Elder did, when he said, two thousand years ago, "What is hateful to you *do not do* to your neighbor. That is the whole Law, and all else is commentary."⁵

So, what does it mean to love God and neighbor?

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your *heart*, and with all your *soul*, and with all your *mind*.” That’s number one. And the other is like it.

In ancient Judaism, the *heart* is the seat of our physical, spiritual, and mental life; the *soul* – our *psyche*, in Greek – represents the center of our inner life; and *mind* refers to our ability to think, comprehend, reason, and understand.⁶ Thus, we shall love the LORD our God with our entire being.

Love of God is more about our loyalty and obedience than feelings or emotions. And the things we do out in the community reflect our love for God and neighbor.

Loving the LORD our God is also an intimate relationship. It is the starting point of all else that we are. Loving one’s neighbor is more concrete, as Rabbi Hillel said. This is radical stuff; it’s not for the squeamish; and not everyone wants you to do it.

So, what do we do? Where, in our messed-up world – and it’s been messed up for a very long time – where do we find hope?

Maybe it depends on where we stand. Will we stand with Herr Professor Barth and acknowledge the First Commandment as axiomatic to our faith? Will we defend it?

Will we stand with Jesus who called on us to love our neighbors, whoever they may be? And will we also stand with Rabbi Hillel the Elder?

These are all truths for us to live into, even if they are not always self-evident.

But the LORD spoke to Moses, saying you shall be holy, and then God told him how. Moses wrote it all down and passed it along to us. And, so, here we are today.

Amen.

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¹ Miller, Patrick D. *The God You Have: Politics and the First Commandment*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004, 3.

² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Karl-Barth>

³ Miller, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ Rabbi Hillel the Elder, *Shabbat* 31a in the Babylonian Talmud.

⁶ Barram, Michael D, “Proper 25, Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time: October 26, 2008.” *Lectionary Homiletics* 19 (6): 32–33.