

## Love Thy Neighbor? Love Thy Enemy?

Perhaps there are no more contentious or more diversely interpreted phrases from the Bible than “Love thy neighbor” and “Love thy enemy”. Perhaps there are no phrases whose lessons are more greatly needed in our divided society today. Let us take a close look at where these phrases come from and try to discern the lessons we are intended to learn from them.

“Love thy neighbor” is in the gospel of Matthew and Luke (Lk 10:25-27). In Matthew’s gospel (Mt 22:36-39) Jesus is asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” And Jesus replies, “**You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself**”. When Jesus is asked further, “And who is my neighbor”, He responds with the parable on the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37). This parable identifies a person in need of mercy and kindness as our neighbor — no matter what that person’s race, religion, or station. In addition, the parable points out that all should be merciful and kind regardless of their own race, religion or station.

“Love thy enemy” comes from the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew where Jesus says, (Mt 5:43-48) “**You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So, be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.**” Now Jesus did not provide a parable to answer the question, “And who is my enemy?” But if we look at words that have been interpreted as enemy, they include foe, rival, antagonist, adversary and opponent. So, is that a political foe, organizational rival, personal antagonist, professional adversary, or national opponent? Jesus would likely say yes to all of these - so let us examine Scripture closely to see what we can discern.

Certainly Jesus has already told us that if that enemy is a person in need of mercy and kindness like the one the Good Samaritan encounters along the road, we should show love and compassion. Jesus provides further guidance in Matthew 25:35-36 when he tells us to feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the

prisoner. Once again Jesus identifies those in need of kindness as the ones to love — without regard to being friend or foe. And, praying for a foe to end their persecution and to be civil is frequently the subject of Psalms. However, nowhere does Jesus say that we should love acts of evil perpetrated by an enemy OR a friend. In fact, Psalm 97:10 tells us “The Lord love those who hate evil”. Proverbs 6:17 tells us that the Lord hates the hands that shed innocent blood. Psalms and Proverbs also tell us that there can be no mercy without justice and no justice without mercy.

So is it loving for one to defend the innocent from slaughter by killing the terrorist who is about to commit such an act? Would one be showing love to our enemy by doing so? Would one be showing mercy or justice? Is there a paradox here? No, there is not — remember we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. The act of love, mercy, and kindness would be to save the innocent — (Jn 15:13) “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” And, the act of justice would be to thwart the evil act. Also remember that we are not to tolerate evil acts. Acts 7:24 tells us “when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended and avenged the oppressed man by striking down the Egyptian”. There is ample evidence from Jesus’ behavior in the Bible that loving the sinner and not the sin is proper and appropriate. Biblical and secular history also shows that defending the vulnerable and helpless is the essence of the virtue of charity — which is built upon love for our brothers and sisters.

Perhaps the best way to remember to love our brothers and sisters, our neighbors and our enemies is to recall that our brothers and sisters in need are part of the Body of Christ. And we have the opportunity to tend to a wound in the Body of Jesus each time we are kind to the least of His brothers and sisters requiring help. To show such charity by identifying the needy as part of the Body of Christ allows us to forego any requirement to know whether they are neighbor or enemy, friend or foe.

*References from New American Bible*