

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania
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### Loving, Our Vocation

The Pharisees are still trying to trip Jesus up. One of them asks the question, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus’ response is the elegant summary of the Law. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment,” he says. “And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself”

That’s it. Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. So simply put. So straightforward. Just two loves. Well, three loves really. Loving yourself is implied. How can we love anyone else unless we first love our self?

It is such a beautifully put summary of all the previous commandments, with all their specificity, and all their demands. They boil down to simply this: love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus’ words not only summarize the Law, but they also provide a pretty good summary of his own life and message. Isn’t that what his entire ministry was about? Isn’t that exactly the point of Jesus’ time on earth, and the example he set for us? Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. That is the heart of the Christian vocation. It is the calling of every one of us.

Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Love God entirely. Love God passionately. Don’t hold anything back. Love with wild abandon. Love God with all you’ve got.

Episcopalians are not usually known for our passion, unless it’s a passion for good wine. But this is a commandment, that we should love God in such a way that it involves our entire self

—our bodies, our emotions, our intellect, the depths of our souls. With all our strength, with all our guts, with all our commitment, with all our passion, we are to love God. Have you ever loved anyone, or anything, like that? Well, I can tell you that you have been loved like that.

God loves you with such a depth of passion that it is impossible for us to imagine. God’s delight and love for us knows no bounds. When you love someone, and that person is really special to you, you don’t mind making sacrifices for him or her. For you and me, those sacrifices might mean putting our children’s needs before our own, or a spouse putting a career on hold so the other spouse can pursue a great job opportunity. For God, that meant giving his only Son to come into this world, to love us, and to show us what real love is, and what real sacrifice is. Jesus not only spoke these words in answer to the Pharisee’s question, he lived them every day. He lived out God’s love for us to the point of sacrificing his own life. God gave his Son, and Jesus gave himself to give definition to the word ‘love’. When I was a kid, I never understood why they called the story of Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion, and death *the Passion*. To me passion was something between lovers. I would think of a passionate kiss, not a crucifixion. Now I see that the crucifixion was God’s passionate pouring out of himself. It was God’s eternal love song, sung by Jesus in a language that we could understand. On the cross, Jesus pursued us and our love. It was all about love, and passion. God was saying, “This is how much I love you! This is how important you are to me. Don’t you get it? I can’t say it any clearer than this.”

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

And, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” After all, God loves your neighbor just as passionately as God loves you. Jesus was willing to die for your neighbor. How can we do otherwise than to do our best to love our neighbor too?

When we speak of loving our neighbor, we are not, of course, speaking of love in the merely emotional sense. Our emotions are not under our control, and they are subject to change. We are speaking of love that is deliberate, well intentioned, and active; a love that we choose. We are not speaking of love in the abstract. We are speaking of willing and working for the good for the other.

As already stated, God loves us tremendously. Part of that love is having given us each gifts: talents, personal strengths, even our situation in life with all the advantages that we enjoy. These are all gifts from God. And having given us each our own unique set of gifts, God calls us each to use those gifts in loving him and our neighbor. More than that, God has given us each the gift of his Holy Spirit, which activates those gifts for ministry, maximizing our abilities, and helping us to face challenges we couldn't face alone.

Loving God and our neighbor as ourselves is indeed the heart of the Christian vocation, and it is something we are called to do in every context of our lives. We often speak about ministry as something that happens in the context of the Church. Certainly ministry is something each of us does as we volunteer in the Thrift Shop or serve in the Food Pantry. We exercise our ministry as we work in the altar guild, sing in the choir, teach in the Sunday School. However, you don't spend most of your time in the Church context. You spend most of your time with your family, or working, with friends and neighbors, in short, living your life the other six days of the week. It would be a big mistake to think that your Christian vocation, your ministry is not active in all of these contexts as well.

In fact, we spend so much time in our professional vocations that last year we added to our weekly Prayers of the People a prayer for people who are living out their Christian vocations in the context of their work life, and we pray for a different profession or industry every week.

This week it is telecommunications. So if you work in telecommunications, we are praying for you this week. We hope that over the course of the year we will pray for you in whatever kind of work you do. To be clear, that prayer is about doing our Christian ministry, about living out our divine calling in the context of our work. We haven't communicated that very well apparently, because one of the comments on our recent survey expressed disappointment that we only pray for the baptized. “Shouldn't we pray for everyone?” the commenter wrote. Well, of course we should pray for everyone. But that particular prayer is for all the baptized whom God has placed in various kinds of work, so they can live out their baptismal vows as they make their living.

Loving God and our neighbor certainly involves coming to church on Sunday. I'm all for that. Yet it does not stop there. These two commandments reach into every aspect of our lives, every moment of every day, in whatever situation we find ourselves. God makes quite a claim on us. Coming together as the baptized people of God, in order to worship, to have fellowship, to learn, and just to support one another, is our joy and privilege in the Church. When we come together **as** the Church we experience a concentration of the Spirit that goes with each one of us. We are built up. We are encouraged. We are refreshed. All in order that we can go back out into the world, into our families, our work places, our schools, our recreational activities, to **be** the Church. We love and support one another, so we can go out and love our neighbor.

In the community of the Church, we are so much more than when we are alone. We stand in communion with all the faithful around the world, and throughout time. As the Church, we are able to do so much more ministry together than we can do on our own. We work together, pooling our talents, and we give, pooling our resources, to make the ministry of the Church possible. Every year our parish, our little corner of the Church, makes a list of priorities of ministry that we intend to carry out over the course of the next year. We call that list of

ministry priorities a budget. Our budget represents the best we have to offer before God, the best of our gifts that we have received from God. This morning we invite you to take part in the ministry of Christ Church by pledging to give regularly in 2012. In fact, I can tell you that at this point we have already received pledges from every member of our vestry and our finance commission. By filling out a pledge card you are saying you want to be part of our common offering of ourselves to love and serve God and God’s people.

Every week when we offer the gifts at the altar, we offer the bread and the wine as a way of remembering the sacrifice that God made for us in giving us his Son, and we offer the money that we give as a representation of ourselves, the fruit of our labor, the best of who we are and what we have. In accepting that offering, God blesses us. We are blessed by the glorious presence of our Lord in the sacrament; and we are blessed by having a share in the sacred ministry we do together in his Name. Please pick up your pledge packet at the end of worship this morning, and prayerfully consider your gift to the church in 2012. We ask that the pledge cards be returned in two weeks, on November 6.

Together, and alone... as the Church, and in every context of our lives, we are called to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. As you struggle to live out these commandments that define our Christian vocation, I pray that you remember that you were first loved, deeply and passionately, by the God who calls you to love.

Amen.