

The Greatest and Most Difficult Commandment
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

It's a big election year, and yard signs promoting political candidates have popped up all over town. Maybe you have a sign or two in your yard, too. Think about the last drive you took to the store. What kind of signs did you see? And what kind of inferences did you draw about the persons who placed the signs in their yards? Now think about your own neighborhood. Do your neighbors support the same candidate(s) you do? How does that impact your opinion about that neighbor?

Political polarization in the United States has been on the rise for many years, and increasingly, Americans are more inclined to silo themselves with people who think and vote like they do. The problem is that the "us versus them" mentality creates a society where people no longer seek the common good. But there are people who are resisting the temptation to shut out people that think differently than they do: a recent Wall Street Journal article tells the story of two neighbors who refuse to let political differences ruin their friendship.

The Mitchells, lifelong Democrats, planted a Joe Biden sign in the front yard of their suburban Pittsburgh home. The Gateses, who live next door and are lifelong Republicans, put a Donald Trump sign in theirs. Another homemade sign stands in each yard. It reads: "We (Heart) Them" with an arrow pointing to the other house. In the middle of each heart are the words "One Nation."

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“There’s so much hate,” says Chris Senko Mitchell, who came up with the idea. “We want to send a message.” The message, say members of the Mitchell-Gates households, is this: People on opposite ends of the political spectrum can actually like each other and be civil. In other words--yes, whether or not you are a registered Republican, Democrat, or somewhere in between, you can still be a good neighbor.

Jesus talks a lot about neighbors in the New Testament. He understands that it is easy to be kind and neighborly to people with whom we agree. But, most of the time, we encounter people with different worldviews. Loving your neighbor, especially in an election year, takes an impressive amount of energy and intentionality. The love of neighbor, however, is not just a suggestion from Jesus--it is THE commandment from which hang all the laws and prophets. “When asked which commandment is the greatest, Jesus quotes Judaism’s most fundamental, ancient, and widely recited biblical passage, the Shema [shuh-MAH]: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Deut. 6:5). Unwilling to leave it simply at that, Jesus adds another Scripture that is “like” the first: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). In quoting the Shema, Jesus points out that the aim of the law is to orient one’s entire life toward God. However, one cannot love God without loving

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what God loves! **One cannot love God and oppress or exclude any of God's creatures—even one's enemies.**"¹

God desires that we be good neighbors to each other. Jesus shows us today that being a loving neighbor is not just important to God—it's **most** important. "Here Jesus points to the true character of all God's laws: to help us love and take care of each other and in this way to love God. Take the Ten Commandments, for instance; while the first few are about our need to trust and honor God, the rest are about caring for each other. Further, these laws—that we should not murder, lie, steal, covet, and the rest—are not all that remarkable when you think about it. They are the essential building blocks of any healthy community. What is remarkable is that the Israelites confessed that God gave us these laws, that God cares deeply about how we treat each other."²

Fred Rogers, the patron saint of neighbors, writes, "Jesus would want us to feel as good as possible about God's creation within us, and [in our minds], we would look through eyes, and see what's wonderful about our neighbor."³ The secret to the Gates family and the Mitchell Family and their ability to cross the political chasm is that the families are good friends and they regularly eat dinner together. Their lives, in their own

¹ Bartlett, David L.; Barbara Brown Taylor (2011-05-31). *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4, Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)* (Kindle Locations 7661-7663). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

² Jarvis, Cynthia A. (2013-12-09). *Feasting on the Gospels--Matthew, Volume 2* (Kindle Locations 7238-7243). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

³ Amy Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mr. Rogers*, 80.

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words, are intertwined. They look and see what is wonderful about their neighborhood, and not only do they feel good about themselves, they feel good about their neighbor, too.

As Fred Rogers observed, “All we’re ever asked to do in this life is to treat our neighbor—especially our neighbor in need—exactly as we would hope to be treated ourselves. That’s our ultimate responsibility.” The first step in being a good neighbor is showing neighborly love is to ourselves. We cannot love God without loving whom God loves, and God loves you and me. Orienting our lives toward God and loving those whom God loves has the power to transform, not only our own lives, but our homes, our workplaces, our churches, and even our neighborhoods!

Diana Butler Bass, author and theologian remarks: “Love God, love neighbor. These words have sounded forth for millennia — through political crises, times of violence, pandemics and suffering, and many a dark winter. And they have guided humankind toward justice, peace, and healing, shining their bright light in the worst of times.

What could be more relevant to our elections, to getting through the pandemic, and for facing our anxieties, than the Great Command and the Golden Rule? Sometimes the simplest thing is the most needed thing.

When you vote, remember: Love God, love your neighbor.

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When you don your mask, remember: Love God, love your neighbor.

When you listen to the news, remember: Love God, love your neighbor.

When you can't catch your breath, remember: Love God, love your neighbor.

Whatever you do, remember: Love God, love your neighbor.⁴

Let's love our neighbors so radically, that stories about people who remain friends despite political differences become the norm, rather than an exception. The simplest thing is the most needed thing, and it will guide us through these days of turmoil and uncertainty.

⁴ <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/the-simplest-thing> [=