

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 (NRSV)

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

9 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. **10** You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

11 You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. **12** And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

13 You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. **14** You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. **16** You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. **18** You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Matthew 5:43-44 (NRSV) - **Love for Enemies** (*from the Sermon on the Mount*)

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ **44** But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

“Justice and Joy”

It seems hardly possible that it has been two weeks since the Super Bowl. After months of speculation and prognostication, rivalries, questionable calls by referees, wins, losses, and mid-season trading, the big game is over in one day, news reports last for another day or two, and then we hear nothing about NFL football for a couple of months.

What seems to linger longer are the commercials. I increasingly hear people say, “Oh, I just watch the Super Bowl to see the new commercials!” This year’s broadcast did not disappoint us. Even the Planter’s Peanut was resurrected! Interest in the game **and** the commercials can make it challenging for the viewer to get to the kitchen for more snacks, for fear of missing the highlight of the game or the ads that everyone will be talking about.

After the first quarter of this year’s game, as I was headed to the kitchen, I heard, “***The ancient Greeks had four words for love.***” I froze, wondering if one of the cats had stepped on the remote control and changed the channel away from the Super Bowl. What could ancient Greek, and words for love that I learned my first semester of seminary, possibly be doing amid the most expensive ad buy of the year?

As the 60-second spot for New York Life insurance company unfolded before my eyes, I was amazed to hear an explanation of these four aspects of love. The insurance company’s ad continued: “***The first is philia — philia is affection that grows from friendship. Next, there’s storge — the kind you have for a grandparent or a brother. The third is eros, the uncontrollable urge to say ‘I love you.’ The fourth kind of love is different. It’s the most admirable. It’s called agape — love as an action. It takes courage. Sacrifice. Strength.***”

If those definitions sound familiar, chances are it’s because of C.S. Lewis, the 20th-century Anglican academic, Christian and author of the beloved “Chronicles of Narnia,” who wrote about them in a book titled “The Four Loves.” In it, he highlighted the same four types of love delineated by New York Life: storge (affection), philia (friendship), eros (romantic) and agape (charity).

Now, at one level, I should be grateful that an insurance company with deep enough pockets to afford a Super Bowl ad has added a nuanced definition of love to the public conversation. In between brain-rattling tackles and blatant consumerism was planted a seed of beauty and joy, inspiration and hope.

But Lewis and for Christians more broadly, agape, that greatest of all loves, is the unconditional, all-encompassing, selfless, divine love embodied in Jesus Christ. Christ’s love is freely given with no expectation of return.

Now, while Jesus makes a claim upon his followers, it has nothing to do with filing an insurance claim, and everything to do with baptismal identity.

If love is “an action” as the ad claims, “strength” may not be a part of the equation — at least not for a faith where “power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). As Lewis writes in “Mere Christianity”: “If you want to get warm then you have to stand near the fire; if you want to get wet, then you have to get into the water.”

In other words, to fully know agape love is to experience it, to live it, to embody it. It’s why the action of divine love is radically borne out in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35). Agape love knows no bounds or limits. It reflects the fullness of God’s love for humanity, and the often aspirational ways we are invited to love one another. It is not withheld from those different from us, or even from our enemies.

It would seem that living in agape love would be all we followers of Jesus would need to have to be holy, to live in a right relationship with God and with humanity. Why then, do we need to hear this passage from Leviticus? The whole book of Leviticus was intended to instruct the Levites, the keepers of the law, how to enforce the “holy living” clause for the Israelites. There were 613 laws to be kept and enforced. How could any human being be expected to remember and keep them all? ‘All of the time?’

But this was the rule of law against which the actions and teachings of Jesus were to be compared. This was the law which Jesus came to fulfill. These were the codes which defined holy relationships that would glorify the Creator and bring loving unity to the world’s inhabitants. After all, when harvesting one’s crops and produce, one should put the needs of the less fortunate above greed for highest profit. That is why the land-owner is instructed to leave some of the harvest in the fields for others to glean. One should live honestly, with integrity, when dealing with others, as that builds respectful relationships based on trust. **This is Justice.**

And when Jesus internalizes the command to “love one’s neighbor as one’s self,” he actually augments it by stating in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5: 43 *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”*

I wonder if those on the mountainside listening to Jesus teaching were wondering why Jesus was meddling with the natural social order of

neighbors and enemies. But this kind of relationship, Jesus implies, fulfills the intimate, growing, healthy, maturing relationship of wholeness with God for which we were created. **This is Joy!**

So today, we are called to reflect on these questions:

1. How do we use only what we truly need, so that a portion of our harvest can help to support those less fortunate?
2. Do we invite people to glean in our proverbial fields?
3. Do we deal justly with all people, regardless of their economic status, race, creed, culture, sexual orientation, or citizenship status?
4. How do we love our neighbor as ourselves through our actions and through extravagant welcome?
5. Do we have “enemies” as individuals or as a community?
6. If so, are we praying for the enemies, and reaching out to them?
7. How do we transform enemies into neighbors?
8. What does God’s love in us look like?

There’s a reason the early Christians gathered to partake in agape meals or “love feasts,” a practice that continues in the ritual action of the Eucharist/Holy Communion/The Lord’s Supper. They knew that love in the abstract was nothing compared with the embodied love of relationship with God and one another. **Justice and Joy!** It’s not easy, and it can’t be explained in a one-minute television commercial.

But, hey, we’re talking about a Super Bowl ad for an insurance company. We are spending 20 minutes talking about a 60 second commercial. So maybe we’re feeding right into the marketing genius of Madison Avenue. Unless, of course, armchair theologians weren’t the intended target audience.

We are the intended target audience for the teachings of the Levites, for Jesus, the Messiah, and for the Holy Spirit who reminds us of all of Jesus’ teachings. This message was, and is, meant for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.