

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
October 25, 2020

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*The First Epistle of St John* tells us “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” (1 John 4:20) When people experience difficulty saying their prayers they often wrongly conclude they are unable to love God. Those people need to remember St John’s advice. Forget about God, at least for the moment! Who *do* you love: your son, your niece, your grandmother? Then go on loving that person. Loving that person will lead to loving God.

Love of God and love of neighbor, as much as you love yourself, are two sides of the same coin. That is because God is love, and wherever there is love, there is an introduction to loving God. Love of a son, or a niece, or a grandmother, honors the Creator, even when we are unaware that this is so. Not only that, but in the course of time such a practice of loving necessarily expands beyond the relative who is seen to the love of God Himself. Through the act of loving, God ceases to be for us a theological abstraction and is revealed as Someone Personal. “God is love” means He is the origin and destination of love. He owns all the stock in the company! If anyone loves, he is close to God.

In the English language we have a problem talking about love because we only have one word for love in our vocabulary. By contrast, New Testament Greek has three words: *agape*, *eros*, and *philos*. When Our Lord Jesus used the word “love” in explaining the commandment, He was not talking about a brotherly feeling or a physical relationship. He was describing a *commitment to another*. And to explain what He meant, the Lord told the story of the Good Samaritan. In it we can hardly presume this Samaritan had personal feeling or physical attraction for the poor soul beaten and lying by the roadside. These two men had never seen one another before this moment. But in taking the poor fellow to an inn and paying for nursing care, the Good Samaritan acted lovingly toward him. And Our Lord says this is the meaning of the commandment to “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

A neighbor is not the person living in the apartment unit next to yours! You may never even see that person. A neighbor is anyone who enters your own sphere of existence. That’s your bubble! Nowadays, thanks to the pandemic, social distancing is the order of the day. But how do you treat a person who gets into your

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sphere? Do you treat him like a pain in the neck, and an imposition or a threat to your own self-interest? None of us treats *ourselves* that way. We may not like ourselves all the time because we are much too conscious of our own unlikable qualities. But we also have a *high degree of tolerance* for our own failings. And we hope other people will excuse our flaws just as we do. Every one of us wants others to realize there is a deeper part of us which is redeemable and very much desires to be good. We grant ourselves *yards of forgiveness*, and we hope others won't make up their minds about us with snap judgments.

That is what our Lord Jesus has in mind about our relationship with our neighbor. To love your neighbor as yourself means doing for him what needs to be done *just as you do for yourself*. It includes the same high degree of tolerance, the same generous forgiveness, and the same hope that, looking past the flaws, the good will be seen.

We learn to love by *doing* love, not by trying to feel love. And by doing love to others we are able to see, we will come to loving God Whom we cannot see. Qoheleth said love is "like nails firmly fixed by one Shepherd." (*Ecclesiastes 12:11b*) Blessed Jesus says on those nails everything else is hung, all the glory of the law and the prophets.