

Date: October 24, 2021 (Pentecost 22)

1. Texts: Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Ps. 34:1-8; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52.
2. Subject: discipleship.
3. Topic: social responsibility.
4. Aim: provide a framework.
5. Proposition: "Christians are obligated by Christ to care for others in word and deed."

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

'The first [commandment] is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'¹

Two weeks ago, I met a woman in a coffee shop who did not believe in these two commandments. I don't know exactly what her denominational background is, but when she left our rather intense discussion, she said, "God bless," so I'm presuming there was a Christian background. But she didn't believe in these commandments.

The proof of that is that she refused to wear a mask while ordering her beverage and she objected to having to show proof of vaccination so that she could dine in with a young Mennonite woman she had just met in line. In clear terms she rejected the idea that Christians have a social responsibility to others and that in our current context that social responsibility included mask mandates and vaccinations against Covid-19.

But Jesus was unmistakably clear: we are to love God with all that we are and we are to love others—and here this is not limited to our fellow Christians—in the same way.

That love includes,

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's

¹ Matthew 12:29-31.

life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.²

We are to make sacrifices on behalf of others to demonstrate the love of God working in us and through us. In our current circumstances this will necessarily include wearing masks, washing hands and receiving vaccinations.

There is no religious exemption to these commands. Jesus did not limit them to his followers. While in practical terms, the “neighbours” to whom Jesus is referring would likely have all been Jewish neighbours, Jesus did not limit these commands to the lost sheep of the house of Israel or make any other clearly Jewish reference. We are to love God with all that we are. We are to love others in the same way. We demonstrate that love by personal and meaningful sacrifice. There are no allowable exemptions to God's command to love.

This means that social responsibility trumps individual rights and privileges. The mind boggles at the implications of this for public policy, climate change, and involvement in political action. The faithful Christian—the one who actually loves God with all that she is—can never start a sentence with, “It is my right...” Any claim about the infringement of individual rights must always be balanced with the divine demand for social responsibility.

This truth functions on many levels, from the smallest and most intimate of communities to a global scale.

The smallest and most intimate of communities is marriage. Spouses are to love God with all that they are and love each other in the same way. Spouses look to make meaningful sacrifices for one other. We can't say, “Oh, I would die for my wife.” Instead, we actually look for ways that we can sacrifice: “Oh, I am giving up this for my wife.”

Parents can't say, “I would take a bullet for my kids.” Rather, we actually give up this or that promotion so that we can spend more time with the children. The alcoholic father gives up alcohol so that he can spend his energy on building relationships within the family.

² John 15:12-14.

Like a boulder dropped into a lake, the concentric rings of social responsibility wash out to affect all our communal relationships. So, no one likes wearing masks, but we do it out of love for others. For some people, the after-effects of the vaccination are uncomfortable, but we do it out of love for people we don't even know. Right now, we take care of our mental and physical health so as to protect our health care systems. We limit our use of fossil fuels. We recycle what we can.

In all this, we actively sacrifice even our own individual rights for the sake of the community. We are not our own. We were bought with a price. Christ has purchased us through his sacrifice, and we are therefore joined to one another through the love of God. The reality of Christ joins us to all humanity throughout all time.

It does not matter if your neighbours and fellow citizens don't make sacrifices in return. It does not matter if all they do is accept your sacrifices as their right. Jesus did not say, "Love only those who love you back." The disciples of Jesus are to show his greater love even if it is unnoticed by others.

In light of my conversation with this woman and the harassment frontline workers are experiencing, I'm going to say that I don't really care if anyone disagrees with me. Christians are obligated to obeying the Two Great Commands. We, who have been saved by the love of God, are commanded to love others in meaningfully sacrificial ways. There are no exemptions to these commands.

"Oh, but it's so hard to know who to believe." In this case, not really. We believe Christ. It is his sacrificial love that establishes the pattern for our social responsibility. When he says, "Love all others in this particular way," we believe him.

So, we sacrifice our political ideologies for the sake and safety of others. We sacrifice our prejudices and racially motivated assumptions. We sacrifice our privileged positions, making room for others to excel. If we love Christ, then we

love him sacrificially. If we love Christ sacrificially, then we love others sacrificially. That's just the way it is for Christians.

This truth will not be a popular one, either in the wider Church or in society. I could suffer for writing and publishing such a sermon. Just think about the abuse healthcare workers and serving staff have suffered. But out of love for God, I have written this sermon. I am willing to make the sacrifice.

But, now, I have to wait to publish this sermon online until my wife comes home. She has to read it and agree to possibly sacrifice her sense of security out of love for me and for God. You see, I cannot prophecy how people will react once I upload this text to the diocesan website. There will be people who will want to champion individual rights over social responsibility. And clearly, such people may not use loving means to express their ideology. My wife may suffer for the sake of the gospel. I cannot force her to make that choice. Just as I cannot force anyone to be vaccinated. As Jesus chose to die on the cross, we must choose to sacrifice for others.

I am certain that, when we do the sacrificially loving thing, God is pleased with us, even if it's only a tiny act. When we do the sacrificially loving thing, we are actually fulfilling his Great Commission. This becomes our purpose as the Body of Christ. When love is expressed as sacrifice, we are living in the image of Christ and so proclaiming his salvation to our world. This is God's commission to the Church and to all Christ's disciples.

AMEN.