



**“God, Self, Neighbor”**

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Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, October 23, 2011  
Matthew 22:34–46 (NRSV)***

Many of you know that before Stephanie and I moved to California nine years ago, we lived in Cleveland. Actually our home was in University Heights, an inner-ring suburb on the east side of the city. For those who may not know, University Heights is primarily a bedroom community that is home to an excellent Jesuit college called John Carroll University. It is also primarily a Jewish neighborhood, with Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox synagogues, temples, schools, and businesses. Stephanie and I were the only *goyem* on the street.

II

Dr. Jan Larsen, the mother of one of my best friends in seminary, Dawn, served as a professor in the psychology department at John Carroll. When I was in seminary in Boston, University Heights was the half-way mark (sort of) for me in my travels home. Dawn and I carpooled from Beantown to University Heights every Christmas. I spent the night at her mother’s house, and then drove another 12–14 hours the next day to central Iowa. (I don’t miss the commute.)

Because I had some acquaintance with University Heights and a friend who could advise us about neighborhoods and housing prices, we decided to start our search for a home on the eastside of the city when we made our transition from New York to Cleveland several years ago. That decision turned out to be a good one for us.

The people who we got to know the best in University Heights, outside of our work and church lives, was a family that lived two doors down from us—the Weinstains.

Stephanie and I moved to Ohio in the summer months, but because of our busy travel schedules, we never met the Weinstains or any of our other neighbors until the first big snowstorm hit that winter.

I have a vivid memory of being waist deep in snow in the front of our house trying to shovel the sidewalk along the tree lawn. This was no small feat, because I had to first shovel my way out the door, down the steps, and on down the driveway to get to the sidewalk next to the tree lawn.

In the Cleveland area, unlike Cherryland, there are actually sidewalks, and there are laws about sidewalks there. One of the laws is that if you own the home in front of the sidewalk, you have to construct and maintain the sidewalk, which includes keeping the sidewalk free and clear of snow, ice, and debris. It's the law, for example, in University Heights, that all city sidewalks have to be shoveled by 7 a.m. on school days so that children can get safely to school. Homeowners who don't have their sidewalks cleared on time are fined.

This sidewalk law seemed a little harsh to me as a newcomer to UH, but it was one that I understood, in principle, because it was all part of being a good neighbor, and because, well, not everyone in the world would get up in the morning and shovel six feet of snow off their sidewalk without a little external reminder and encouragement like a city ordinance.

The upside of having to haul myself out of bed early that cold winter morning is that this law was the occasion for me to meet our neighbors, the Weinstains. Actually, it was the occasion to first meet their then 7-year-old daughter, Sarah, and her five-year-old sister Leah.

Sarah was a chatty, inquisitive young woman. On that morning, it was clear to her parents that she was not going to school that day on account of snow. So they allowed her to put on her winter coat, and go outdoors and entertain herself for a while.

As it turned out, that day, Sarah deemed supervising my snow shoveling job to be the most interesting opportunity available to her. So she came over to where I was shoveling and introduced herself, and eventually plopped herself down on the snow bank and started asking me all kinds of questions—first about my shoveling style, and next about whether I had any children. She was hoping that I could produce a playmate for her, since she was the only grade-school child who lived on our street.

I explained that Stephanie and I did not have any children, though we liked children, but that we had two cats, which we called “the kids,” and I asked, “Do we get any ‘points’ for cats?”

“Yes!” she explained. “Can I play with them?”

“Of course,” I said. “But go home and ask your parents for permission first. I don't want them thinking that you got lost in a snow bank.”

Sara went home to ask permission, which in turn piqued the interest of her five-year-old sister, Leah. In a few moments, both girls returned to our house and paid their first visit on Chelsea and Tim. That's also how the Weinstains became our Cleveland cat sitters when we were out of town.

Over the next seven years that we lived in UH, Stephanie and I got to know the Weinstains better. We especially enjoyed watching the girls grow up. A special part of that process was being involved in learning about their religious and spiritual formation process, through Sunday School. Of course, their Sunday School was different from ours. They were studying the Hebrew language, literature, rituals, and celebrations, while we were learning about the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament and about Christian traditions and services.

We were greatly impressed, for example, by how quickly and how well the girls learned Hebrew. Their pronunciation at a young age, in particular, was remarkable, at least in comparison with Christian seminarians, including myself. I still remember Leah coming over to our front yard while I was picking up fallen apples one evening, reciting the Shema from memory for me, after having been enrolled only a few weeks in Hebrew School. Leah was five years old at the time.

In Hebrew, the Shema goes like this:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֶחָד

Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.  
Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד

Barukh sheim k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed.  
Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever.

וְאַהַבְתָּ אֵת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ

V'ahav'ta eit Adonai Elohekha b'khol l'vav'kha uv'khol naf'sh'kha uv'khol m'odekha.  
And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל לִבְבְּךָ

V'hayu had'varim ha'eileh asher anokhi m'tzav'kha hayom al l'vavekha.  
And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart.

וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבְנֶיךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָּם

V'shinan'tam l'vanekha v'dibar'ta bam  
And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them

בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ

b'shiv't'kha b'veitekha uv'lekh't'kha vaderekh uv'shakh'b'kha uv'kumekha

when you sit at home, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up.

וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ

Uk'shar'tam l'ot al yadekha v'hayu l'totafot bein einekha.

And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.

וּכְתַבְתֶּם עַל מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ

Ukh'tav'tam al m'zuzot beitekha uvish'arekha.

And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.<sup>1</sup>

The Shema is the centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer service. The prayer is named the “Shema,” because the Hebrew term, which is the first word in the prayer, is (in English) “Hear,” or more completely “Hear, O Israel.”

Whenever I hear this passage recited, I am reminded of a phrase that my Grandma Thomsen used to say when she wasn’t sure that she was getting her point across to our young teenage uncle who lived at home when we were kids, and (on occasion) to my sister or me when she needed to get our attention. Grandma would say, “Clean out your ears.”

Similarly, my junior high math teacher, who was also our high school football coach, used to say, “Listen up, people!” in a rather loud, stern voice.

You get the idea. The Shema begins with a call to pay attention, as in, “If you haven’t heard anything else I’ve said, ‘Hear this. This is the headline message in the Torah, the Law.’”

In Protestant Bibles, the Shema is found in Deuteronomy 6:5, which is the chapter that follows the story of Moses descending from Sinai with the Ten Commandments. For those of us who had the privilege of growing up going to Sunday School (as Protestants call it) or Catechism (as Roman Catholics call it), we likely recognize the Shema as the first of the Ten Commandments.

The Shema is the cornerstone of Hebrew religion, law, and liturgy. Every practicing Jew in the world—even a five year old—knows it by heart. Even most Christians know the Shema. They/we just may not know the Hebrew reference for the passage.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jewfaq.org/prayer/shema.htm>

When we make these connections, it is perhaps not surprising to us that when the Pharisees asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus recited the Shema.

If a modern teenager, who is a practicing Jew, would have been asked the Pharisee’s question, she or he would likely conclude their quotation of the Shema with the word: “Duh!” As in duh, even a five year old knows what the greatest commandment is.

#### IV

Today’s passage is the third in a series of three accounts in Matthew, in which as I explained last Sunday, the Pharisees (the religious authorities of Jesus’ day) set three unsuccessful “mousetraps” for Jesus.

Part of the irony in today’s story is that a five-year-old like Leah Weinstein could have correctly answered the Pharisee’s question in light of Hebrew Law. So what is special about Jesus’ response to their question isn’t that he answered correctly, it’s that he coupled his response with another law, which served to express his interpretation of the First Commandment.

Jesus imbedded in his quotation of the First Commandment, an interpretation of what it means to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and mind. He coupled the Shema with the Levitical command to love your neighbor as yourselves, as written in Lev. 19:18.<sup>2</sup>

So that we understand more clearly what Jesus is saying, I’ll express his response in this colloquial way:

Listen up, Israel—Clean out your ears, you Christians—the Lord our God is one God...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all of your mind.

And the way that you demonstrate your love for God is that you love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. These three messages are imbedded in Jesus’ interpretation of the Shema. He offers this counsel as a kind of spiritual trifecta. You can’t have one without the other: love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself.

Love of God without a horizontal manifestation of that love is void, because God loved the world. That’s what we learn in the book of Genesis and in the Gospel of John. God doesn’t just love to be loved. God loves the world. If we love God, we must love the world too.

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<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year A* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International) pp. 489-490.

Similarly, if we only love ourselves, which is what the gospel of Western capitalism espouses when taken to an extreme, we make gods of ourselves, which is a violation of the second of the Ten Commandments.

Finally—love of neighbor alone—is not faithful to the law or the gospel either. Taken to an extreme, love of neighbor without love of God and love of self becomes self-destructive to the person who exhibits such behavior, and ultimately it isn't helpful to the neighbor, because such behavior cannot be sustained by anyone except Jesus, and such behavior may inhibit our neighbor's agency and capacity to care for and take responsibility for themselves.

To be in a healthy relationship with our neighbor, then, requires that we love God (which involves spiritual practices, devotion, worship, meditation, etc.); that we love ourselves (which involves care for our own soul so that we are fit to care for others); and love of our neighbor (which includes caring for others at times when they may not be fully able to care for themselves, and it involves affirming the agency of the other, and the need for healthy reciprocity in our neighborly relationships).

Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. This is a new—no, make that an old, a very old, holy—trinity on which all of the Law and the prophets, and the Gospel, hang.

By seeking and finding a way to balance these three practices in our lives, we find the spiritual balance that we need, and God is glorified. Amen.