

From time to time – not as frequently as I should – I make a to-do list. I needed one this past week. This typically happens when life seems a bit out of control, and I need a piece of paper to tame it. And my criterion is this: Do I have more things to do – major things, mind you – than I can count on one hand? If so, I need to find a pencil and some paper. These lists that I make serve somewhat as my map for the day or the week, a pathway through my particular storms.

Now imagine if your to-do list numbered 613 items! At the time of Jesus that was the number of individual commandments required of Jewish people. And with the Pharisees' zeal for the law each and every commandment was expected to be on the forefront of one's mind. At this time the Jewish people understood there to be 248 parts of the body. As it turns out 248 of these 613 commandments were "positive" – "you shall prepare your food this way...; you shall harvest your grain that way...". The other 365 commandments – corresponding to the number of parts of the year – were "negative or prohibitive" commandments: "you shall not worship such and such...; you shall never wear this or that...". By Jesus' day these commandments had grown and blossomed so that every aspect of one's life was regulated somehow. In a way the idea was to circumscribe life: "God wants you to live your life a certain way, and this is it!" And with 613 does and don'ts the way was indeed very narrow.

A frequent rabbinic exercise in response to all these commandments is the one we find in our gospel reading this morning. The Pharisees ask Rabbi Jesus to boil all of these commandments down to one: "Which is the greatest commandment?" they ask. Matthew tells us they are "testing" him, a verb that Matthew reserves only for the Pharisees and Satan. Jesus responds with the Shema, the ancient prayer of Israel from Deuteronomy that all Jews were to pray twice a day: love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. What a wonderful way to distill the essence of the law, a sentiment that is echoed time and again in the psalms: loving the law is loving God. Kind of a Hallmark Card for the Pharisees: God, how do I love you?... let me count the 613 ways... "For the moments of our lives." Now this would be a fine place to stop for Jesus. But he goes further, quoting from Leviticus this time: "A second [commandment] is like this first: love your neighbor as yourself." Now this phrase: "is like" complicates things immensely. In the Greek "is like" does not mean, "is almost the same," or "is pretty darn close." In the Greek it means "exactly alike." Of equal importance to loving God with all your being is loving your neighbor as you love yourself. And we mustn't forget that throw-away phrase, "as yourself." 613 commandment boil down to this: We love God. We love our neighbor. We love ourselves. All three are of equal import, and are indeed woven together. And Jesus goes even further still to state that on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. This is bigger than the law as practiced in Judaism. Jesus is ascribing to the love of God and love of neighbor and love of self the fulfillment, the summary statement of all God's revelation. If Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God in flesh then these two commandments are the ways we humans incarnate God's will in creation.

At this point this all seems very ethereal and esoteric. Those 613 commandments grounded the law. How did Jesus ground the love of God, the love of neighbor, the love of self? By giving himself completely. He gave himself completely first to God. In every aspect of his life he poured himself out for the sake of God and to God. Why? So that God would be glorified. This is Jesus' mantra throughout the gospels. He fed over 5000 people so that God might be glorified. He healed on the Sabbath so that God might be glorified. He raised Lazarus from the dead so that God might be glorified. He poured out his life on the cross so that through his

resurrection God might be glorified. And this is of course inextricably bound together with the love of neighbor. Jesus lived out his love of God by pouring himself out for all people. The hungry were fed. The broken were healed. The dead breathed again. New life was offered for all.

Jesus shows us a path that holds the hope, and not the hazard, of the 613 commandments of the law. His way is the law, but the law cracked open, the law turned on its head. Instead of a life-draining narrowing path of countless do's and don'ts Jesus directs us on a path that opens with the potency of relationship. We love. Pure and simple. We love God. We love humankind. We love ourselves. Sounds easy, doesn't it? But you know as well as I do that we all fall short in living out this love. What seems to go wrong?

I suspect that much of what derails our capacity to love God and love neighbor goes back to that little throw-away line: "as yourself." We are woefully deficient in our ability to love ourselves. Several years ago I overheard someone at another church saying, somewhat wistfully, that they missed hearing sermons about how depraved we all are. He concluded, "At least then I know where I stand." There really is a sense of security in believing that we are utterly corrupt, and can only rely on God's mercy. Unfortunately the security of self-contempt only breeds stagnation. "Since I am worthless I can offer nothing." Much more challenging for us is the recognition that God created each and every one of us for good, to be recipients and conveyors of love and care, and therefore responsible somehow to grow into that goodness, to work to become that person God created us to be. Grace abounds in this process, and we can do none of this outside of God. In these two commandments Jesus is really talking about transformation and transformed living. The "to-do" list becomes the "to-be" list. And transformation must begin here, in ourselves. Growing in Christ, growing in love for God and love for others and being able to live that out means that we must see ourselves as worthy of that love God offers to us and through us. Tight-fisted, we have nothing to offer.

I am reminded of a Tori Amos song she wrote some fifteen or more years ago called Winter. The focus of the song is the maturation of a young girl into womanhood, the movement from a winter into spring. The girl, in conversation with her father, speaks of yearning for what this new life might hold, but finds herself restrained somehow from living into this change, this spring. The refrain of the song is the words of her father, who says, "When you gonna make up your mind? When you gonna to love you as much as I do? When you gonna to make up your mind?" This could very well be the voice of God asking us the very same question, "When you gonna make up your mind? When are you gonna love you as much as I do?" Here is our challenge.

When we find that we embody God's abundant love, then we begin to become abundance. Friends, our world needs abundance. We are living in a time of scarcity. We all know this. Our debts grow higher. Our sense of security is quaking right now. Every person in this place has felt the thunder of the current economic crisis. And financially St. Gabriel's is in a very rough spot. In such a climate how do we dare live out abundance? Parker Palmer speaks of what he calls the "scarcity assumption": "Daily I am astonished at how readily I believe that something I need is in short supply. ...It is ironic that by embracing the scarcity assumption we create the very scarcities we fear.... We create scarcity by fearfully accepting it as law and by competing with others for resources as if we were stranded in the Sahara at the last oasis.

"In the human world, abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store." Have the sense to choose community! That is when we know we've made up our mind...

To love ourselves is to enable us to choose community and relationship. Palmer goes on to conclude, “Community doesn’t just create abundance – community IS abundance.”

Which brings us to this Oblation Sunday. Why Oblation Sunday? This morning we celebrate the abundance that is St. Gabriel’s. A little over ten years ago a faithful people chose to incarnate love, to incarnate new life and a new creation in this place. And look at us now! We continue as a vital and love-incarnating community that finds our common lives together to be an ongoing new creation. Just look at the Fall Festival yesterday. It was glorious. It was binding. Yes, it was hard work. Incarnating love is not always easy. And yes, we raised some much-needed money for the church; but more than that we raised up one another. And that is what we do at St. Gabriel’s so extraordinarily well. Just look at the Food Pantry. Look at our choir, our Men’s group, our DOK, our sacred sweepers and holy mowers. Just look at our altar guild, our Stephen’s Ministers, our children’s teachers, our centering pray-ers, our vergers, acolytes, and lay Eucharist ministers. Look at our Gabby-keepers, our meal-fixers, our Parish Carers, our Good-News-At-Noon feeders, our flower-array-ers, our quilt-tying pray-ers. And that is barely scratching the surface. Look at the ways you reach out to each other and the world around you in love. Look at yourself, your hands, your hearts. You embody Christ in this place and in the world. That is why Oblation Sunday. It is our way of honoring the new creations that you bring to St. Gabriel’s every time you cross this threshold. Oblation means “self-offering.” In its truest form oblation incarnates love: love for God, love for others, and love for self. This day we give thanks to God for these myriad incarnations. And to God be the glory!