

Global Health Week

8/24-8/27

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Love Thy Neighbor in the Raging Pandemic? You must be Joking!

By Rev. Dr. R. Daniel Premkumar

"The scribe said to Jesus, 'Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM; AND TO LOVE HIM WITH ALL THE HEART AND WITH ALL THE UNDERSTANDING AND WITH ALL THE STRENGTH, AND TO LOVE ONE'S NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.'" When Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Mark 12. 32-34

Introduction

As the vicious coronavirus pandemic continues to spread across India, we seem to be gradually losing count of the cost with the number of dead rising exponentially during the Second Wave this year. Even so, the floodgates of human compassion and personal sacrifice, irrespective of religious affiliation, began to show in unlikely places.

There are many stories. An auto-rickshaw (small cab) driver sold his wife's wedding jewelry to convert his three-wheeler into a free ambulance for the Covid sick and the dying. Sikh religious houses called *Gurudwars* not only served a million meals a day for the affected and the impoverished, but also free oxygen for the needy. Similarly, churches in different places extended help. With such a human catastrophe engulfing the wide human family with no respite in sight, we need to enable the church at large in India and elsewhere to respond to this pandemic and to live out Jesus' mandate- 'love God and *love neighbor as yourself* and as the Scribe in the above text added- '*It is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.*'

What is more precious than Burnt Offerings and Sacrifices?

Mark states that it was a Scribe who asked Jesus the question, "*What commandment in the Torah is foremost of all?*" Scribes surely were the official religious establishment of the day. Religious people tend to settle in their comfort zone, but Jesus re-interprets the traditional

Shema (Deut. 6, *Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One, you shall love him with all your heart* etc.) with Leviticus injunction (Lev 19.18- *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*). At the end of this memorable conversation Jesus appreciates the Scribe's response and honors him with this divine compliment- '*you are not far from the kingdom of God*'. Jesus who normally held a very critical opinion about these teachers of the Torah and the Pharisees of his day, had great admiration for this teacher of the Law.

Today the Christian religion has too often turned heavenward expecting the Return of the Lord and awaiting the End Times. If so, why bother about loving your neighbor or climate change or the abuse of our planet or be concerned about everybody, including the poorest of the poor getting vaccinated across the globe against COVID-19?

What more, imagine the virus making the person *unclean* and needing to be quarantined. Surely, the medical community has prescribed COVID appropriate behavior in dealing with the pandemic. But still, one could find ways to comfort and care for the infected. I am reminded of how the public used to treat HIV-infected persons 20-30 years ago or for that matter even those infected with COVID today!

The Magic Word is Love that Binds Even Almighty God with the Neighbor

We have always known that there are many kinds of love in the New Testament and *agapáō* refers to 'the love of God' while *phileō* refers to 'brotherly love'. But surprise, the Christian Scriptures never commanded to 'love' with the word *phileō*. Even when husbands and wives are instructed to love one another, the word *agapáō* is used.

It may come as a surprise to many that the love with which we are called to love God (*agapáō*) is the same kind of love with which we need to love (*agapáō*) our neighbor and those who are infected with COVID. In the New Testament love (*agapáō*) and faith (*pistis*) are closely associated (see Gal 2:20; Eph 6:23-24; 1 Thes 1:3-4; 2 Thes 2:13; James 2:5; 1 Pet 1:8-9, 21-22). Consequently, we begin to learn that followers of Jesus see essentially loving God and loving neighbor as a faith response. For a Christian believer caring for the COVID sick is not merely an act of charity but as intense as loving God and aspiring God's utmost good and preference for the neighbor.

Our Text says, 'and you shall love (*agapáō*) 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 like unto this, 'you shall love (*agapáō*) your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these". In the "*holy triad*" – "faith, hope and love" in 1 Cor 13:13, love is the *greatest* because (by definition) it *includes* faith and hope. *Agapáō* ("to love, prefer") in its biblical sense means to prefer what the Lord prefers, so *agapáō* *originates* with God and is *empowered* by God (1 John 4:7, 10, 19). It means *actively partnering with the Risen Christ* (Rev 1:5, 3:9). *That is why in the New Testament the word agapáō occurs over 250 times compared with philéō which only occurs 38 times.*

Meeting human needs is important, but this can only *really happen* by sharing God's love. Genuine love is always *God-inspired* and *God-empowered*. The *Lord* must inspire an action and empower it for it to qualify as genuine love. As a believer in God of the Bible who raised Jesus from the grave, may the Christian Caregivers around the world become the Front Runners and Champions in instilling hope and love in a devastatingly hopeless context as well!

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