

The great rabbi Hillel, who lived in the century before Jesus, was renowned not only for his scholarship but also for his humility and patience. A popular story says that a gentile seeker, considering conversion to Judaism, went to his colleague Rabbi Shammai and asked him to teach him Torah while the seeker stood on one foot. That is, teach me Torah in a very short time. Shammai was appropriately insulted at this cavalier attitude—worse than “what do I have to do to get a C”—and threw him out. The seeker went to Hillel then with the same request, and the gentle Hillel told him, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this—go and study it!"

That story, along with the story about Jesus and the scribe at the Temple, tells us something about Torah study during antiquity: it was collaborative, maybe fugue-like, with one scholar taking a position and then another scholar rebutting or supporting that position. It's also clear that Jesus was not the first rabbi with this insight about the greatest commandments being to love God and love neighbor, but what's charming in this story is the way the unnamed scribe has engaged Jesus with a question and then excitedly builds on Jesus' answer. “You are right, Teacher; . . . ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Jesus didn't say anything about worship or sacrifice; his questioner brought that in as a new thought. Jesus commends the other scholar, telling him he's not far from the kingdom of God, and then, puzzlingly, no one “dares” to ask any more questions. Maybe others had just planned on picking at Jesus and trying to entrap him; and seeing an actual conversation going on, became intimidated. I don't know. I just think it's a lovely picture of Jesus bonding with a total stranger because of their mutual love of Torah.

Jesus goes on teaching at the Temple with a little first-century-rabbi-like quotation of

scripture against itself, not of direct interest for my purposes right now, but Mark says that the crowd was listening to him with delight, so clearly he was on a roll. Jesus had spent his public life avoiding Jerusalem, knowing how dangerous it would be for him, but it must have been like fresh cold water to him, being at the Temple actually exchanging views with other lovers of scripture and teaching eager, maybe more sophisticated audiences. He must have been loving it.

Then, being Jesus, he segues right on to a sensitive topic: "Beware of the scribes," he says, probably gesturing to a bunch of them ten feet away, "who like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect and have good seats in the synagogue and at banquets." Hoo boy, don't we know that, thinks the crowd; that's the downside of the Temple, you have a lot of status-seekers and hotdogs drawn to this place. Of course, swanking around looking holy so that other people will respect you is fairly harmless, but then Jesus sticks in the knife: "They devour widows' houses." These pious showoffs may know Torah, but they sure don't follow it, if Torah is about loving God and loving neighbor. They don't use their wealth for acts of compassion; rather, they extract wealth from the poorest and most vulnerable. "And for the sake of appearance say long prayers," as if devouring widows' houses passed through their consciousnesses with just a blip. Was that a good idea, to diss the scribes right there where they outnumber Jesus? Perhaps not.

Finally, Jesus watches people putting their offerings for the Temple into the treasury, and notes that while rich people put in large sums, a poor widow's contribution is literally all she had. "This poor widow has put in more than all who are contributing to the treasury," Jesus says. The rich contributed some of their extra, but she put in all she had to live on.

I read this as a continuation of Jesus' critique of the religious establishment. Here among the ostentatious scholars, those who should know Torah better than anybody, this poor widow is living evidence that somebody is not loving their neighbor enough. She shouldn't *be* so poor that she has only a penny to live on, let alone be expected to give it to the Temple. That isn't the natural state of things; that's what happens when people decide that care for their neighbor is less important than enriching themselves. Jesus may also be commending the widow for her generosity and her trust that God will sustain her, but in the context of his previous critique of the self-aggrandizing scribes, you have to be scandalized by her poverty. In the Biblical texts about sacrifices, and what kind of transgression merits what kind of sacrifice, the gravest instances are when community leaders go astray, because they're supposed to be examples to others.

These stories, framed by the great commandments and the example of the uncared-for widow, are about our relationships to one another and to God. Can you even separate loving God and loving neighbor, in real life? Doesn't one imply the other? Clearly we are interdependent, and being intentional about our interdependence is one way we act on our love of God, who also loves our neighbors. The paradox for us, as the Covid 19 pandemic stretches into the foreseeable future, is that we now have to worship God and love our neighbors by staying away from each other. Due to actual conscious decisions by the president of the United States, we were not prepared with tests or vaccines when this coronavirus began to spread, and now the loving thing to do for others is to avoid them so as to reduce the risk of spreading infection. Very counter-intuitive.

We've seen some inspirational responses already. There's a video going around of

Italians on their apartment balconies singing together, stories up in the air above the street.

The Seoul Symphony Orchestra made a video of themselves playing Beethoven's 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony, the Eroica, in honor of the heroic doctors and nurses caring for the sick. The staff at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago took advantage of the shutdown by letting the penguins tour the exhibits, and they shared a great video of a penguin checking out some fish display. People in Des Moines and, I'm sure, Indianola, are setting up networks to offer and ask for help.

But there are also problems that baffle me. How do I help a family whose children are all home from school? I can't come over, or have the children over. How do we serve the Table of Plenty? (Particularly now that the board of supervisors has told Ron that we can't use the county building any more.) How do we support the neighbors whose livelihood depends on physical presence, like restaurant waitstaff? These are challenges we must address . . . as soon as we can figure them out. We will just have to do what we already know how to do: keep our hearts and minds open. Remember the most vulnerable people. Prepare to be surprised.

If we can stay in touch, keep everybody connected through phone calls and notes and internet, we can survive well enough to be ingenious. Isaac Newton invented calculus or some such during the bubonic plague, right? Okay, Isaac Newton isn't everybody's jam, but you know what I mean. Focus on connecting without touching, step 1. Step 2, rely on God to give us good ideas. Step three, connect again. Because it's in conversation with one another that we will hear God's voice.

Let us pray:

O God, our help in ages past and forever into the future, you have taught us that love is the key to knowing you and thus to abundant life. Help us to tap into your love for ourselves, in this time of isolation; help us to support and sustain others with love. We know that nothing is novel to you, or beyond your grace. May we be instruments of your grace, bringing good out of

pandemic. Amen.