

No Greater Love

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, July 5th, 2015

Jesus said, “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” (John 15:13-15).

These short verses from the Gospel of John are often cited in connection with the love of one’s country, since that love at times requires people to lay down their own lives for the sake of others. Concerning this we have the familiar teaching in *True Christian Religion* that

“One’s country is more a neighbor than a single community, because it consists of many communities, and consequently love towards the country is a broader and higher love.... That one’s country should be loved, not as one loves himself, but more than himself, is a law inscribed on the human heart; from which has come the well-known principle, which every just person endorses, that if the country is threatened with ruin from an enemy or any other source, it is noble to die for it, and glorious for a soldier to shed his blood for it. This is said because so great should be one’s love for it. It should be known that those who love their country and render good service to it from good will, after death love the Lord’s kingdom, for then that is their country; and those who love the Lord’s kingdom love the Lord Himself, because the Lord is the all in all things of His kingdom” (#414).

This passage is notable for a whole lot of reasons, including the idea that it is noble to die for one’s country “if it is threatened with ruin from an enemy *or any other source*,” which of course could well include moral and spiritual perversions as well as outward hostilities. But the thing that is especially pertinent to us today on this patriotic weekend is the vital link between the love of one’s country and the love of the Lord. This needs to be clearly understood, since it isn’t necessarily what it appears to be. After all, the greatest love and the first great commandment is to love the LORD, so when He tells us that there is *no greater love* than to lay down one’s life for his friends, He was specifically referring to HIMSELF as the Christian’s friend.

This is also explained in the *New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine*, where if we substitute the word, friend, for neighbor, we learn about how to determine who is a true friend. We read,

“The distinctions of the neighbor, which anyone who belongs to the church certainly ought to know, depend upon the good present in each one. And because all good proceeds from the Lord, it is the Lord who is in the highest sense and in the fullest degree the neighbor, the source of good. It follows from this that anyone is a neighbor to the extent that he has the Lord with him” (#86).

In one sense, of course, *everyone* is our neighbor – because everyone possesses some good from the Lord. But note, the *quality* of the neighbor, and so the determination of how best to serve him, is according to the quality of the good that is in him from the Lord (NJHD #85, 87, 88). *This applies to our country just as it does to an individual*, only on a much larger and more significant scale. In short, to love our country truly we are called upon to love the GOOD that is in

it from the Lord, and in order to love the good we must of course reject the evil that opposes it. So you see, despite the otherwise fine words in one of our hymns (#903) true patriotism is *not* “a love that asks no question,” rather it is a love drawing on real discernment and wisdom, which takes a lot of work and sacrifice quite apart from military service. It may even require civil disobedience; don’t forget, that’s how our nation gained its independence! But if so we have to be prepared to take the consequences, which again may involve great personal sacrifice.

Now you all know the doctrine about the levels or degrees of the neighbor, and you know that the higher up we go in these levels the more important our devotion is or should be. So on the natural level the guy next door is our neighbor in a very limited sense, our community is our neighbor in a more extensive sense because it involves many hundreds or thousands of people, and our nation is our neighbor to a far greater extent because it involves now millions of people. But then we jump to a whole new level with the teaching that the church is even more our neighbor than our country because it involves people’s *spiritual* lives and not just their natural lives. This is a critical distinction since it means we owe a greater devotion to the good of their spiritual lives than to the good of their natural lives, and again, the more people who are affected the greater that devotion should be.

We see this powerfully illustrated in this teaching from the *Arcana Caelestia*, which again puts the love of the neighbor (or friends) in the context of the Lord’s love: -

“The nature of the Lord’s love surpasses all human understanding and is unbelievable in the extreme to people who do not know what heavenly love is in which angels abide. *To save a soul from hell the angels think nothing of giving their own lives; indeed if it were possible they would suffer hell themselves in place of that soul*” (AC 2077:2).

Just imagine! The angels would willingly suffer the torments of hell if it would help one person get into heaven. Of course we can’t ease the pain of others by suffering on their behalf, no matter how much we might pity them, but it does raise the question, “What are *we* willing to suffer to help keep anyone from going off the rails?” What grief or aggravation are we willing to suffer even just to take a public stand on some issue of moral or spiritual life in this nation or in this church? What sacrifices are we willing we make, what losses are we willing to take, what price are we willing to pay to help people stay on track toward eternal life in heaven?

Importantly, the word for “life” in the passages about laying down one’s life, in every one of the Gospels is the Greek, *ψυχή*, from which we get our word, psyche, and it doesn’t just mean natural life, for which there are other words, it means one’s spiritual life or *soul*, and refers to a person’s whole identity, the seat itself of affections and will (Strong’s #5590). The Lord’s words are therefore really serious and must not be taken lightly.

Of course we have to be careful; we never know the half of what lies behind people’s words or actions. And we’re not angels – yet. We all have plenty of work to do on our own. But if we don’t start acting like angels in relation to others, mercifully letting them know what the Lord teaches and giving them all possible encouragement to honor it, we may never get there.

“Love to the Lord,” we read, “cannot possibly be separated from love towards the neighbor, for the Lord’s love is directed towards the whole human race whom He

wishes to save eternally and to join so completely to Himself that not a single one of them perishes. Anyone therefore who has love to the Lord possesses the Lord's love and so cannot help loving the neighbor" (AC 2023).

Love however cannot act effectively without wisdom, and wisdom involves discernment or... good judgment. This is why we have been given the Word – and the heavenly doctrines: - not primarily so that we can learn about the afterlife, or the creation process, or Divine providence, or the correspondences in the letter of the Word, but so that we can learn how to love the Lord and do His will. All the rest is really just a means to that end.

And we know that external, natural conditions – laws, rules and even peer pressure – can support or undermine this love and determination. So it is at least interesting that the heavenly doctrines prescribe eight specific things that are necessary for a healthy civil society. We read,

“The general good consists in these things: that in the society or kingdom there should be 1. what is Divine among them; 2. what is just among them; 3. what is moral among them; 4. diligence, skill and uprightness among them; 5. the necessities for life; 6. the necessities for all kinds of work; 7. the necessities for protection; 8. sufficient wealth, because these three kinds of necessities are procured with it” (Charity #130).

Note that the first four items in this list are spiritual and moral virtues, and not just civil liberties. (Read them again.) These are all things prescribed by the Lord in forms of His Word, and so come from a Source above and beyond what is obvious in this world. These things are the special responsibility of the church, which is to say, the members of the church individually and collectively, and they are things we may well be called upon to support even at the risk of personal sacrifice, including public humiliation, that is, the loss of reputation, honor and gain.

Take for example the principle that there be what is just or moral in civil society. How do we define true justice and morality? – by a popular vote? – by elected representatives or a judgment of the courts? – by some internal perception, varying as it does from one individual to another? Or is this determined by the Lord? *Of course* it's the Lord. And yes, of course we have to abide by the laws of the land as interpreted by our chief justices, or be prepared to suffer the consequences they prescribe, but that is exactly the point of what the Lord means by being willing to lay down our lives. It may sound strange to say it, but one of the problems with our country today may simply be that we are all a little too reticent to stand up for what we know from the Lord to be true: - true for us *and true for the general good of the nation.*

Remember, the Lord said,

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; and ‘a man's enemies will be those of his own household.’ He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matt. 10:34-39).

This passage clearly must be seen in the light of its spiritual sense; we are not necessarily called upon to argue with our relatives. But does that nullify the literal sense? Despite whatever fears or reservations we may have about *military* service it may be a lot easier psychologically to go fight against a political aggressor, or an enemy we don't know, or one with a foreign language, laws or customs, than it is to stand up to friends, family members or patrons whose actions are inconsistent with what the Lord teaches. And no, we don't have to get in their faces about it, but we do need to be clear and we need to be accountable for what the Lord says (Matt. 10:32-33).

Finally, we have to admit that the words, judgment and judgmental, are used today almost entirely in a pejorative sense. But for those who feel that any judgments about other people are simply unjustified, unkind and potentially hypocritical, the Lord has this to say: -

“Who does not see that if people were not allowed to judge as to the moral life of his fellow inhabitants in the world, society would collapse! What would become of society if there were no public courts of law, and if no one was permitted to have his judgment of another? What is **not** lawful, is judgment as to the quality of the interior mind or soul within a person, thus as to what his spiritual state is and hence his lot after death.... A general judgment such as: ‘If in internals you are what you appear to be in externals you will be saved or condemned,’ is allowed; but a particular judgment such as, ‘You are such in internals and therefore will be saved or condemned,’ is not allowed” (CL 523).

Indeed, we are clearly taught that genuine charity *requires* us to “carefully examine” the quality of a person's life, and act accordingly toward that person (NJHD 85). The same applies to our country. This is NOT to say that we should pick faults, but rather observe what people *need* in order to live well, and do our best to provide it (see AC 4955-56) – even when it may be painful and difficult to do so.

We live in perilous times. In many ways our country is at war with *itself*. The good news, though, is that the Lord has foreseen all of this (DP 54, AC 3854:2-3), and that nothing is ever permitted unless some good can come out of it (AC 6489). In fact, we know it is necessary for evil to be exposed and dealt with before any genuine good can be done. OUR job, then, is not to accept and celebrate *everything* we find in our country, but to seek and promote its genuine good by looking first of all to *the Lord and His kingdom*, and then doing everything we can to remove the obstacles, that is, the evils and falsities that obstruct His love and wisdom – in ourselves and in society generally. If this means giving up something of ourselves, whether material or spiritual, so be it. We must never forget that we report to a higher authority. For it is as He said,

“Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life *for My sake and the Gospel's* will save it” (Mark 8:34-35).

Amen.

Lessons: *Joshua* 1:1-9
Children's talk about True Patriotism

Luke 9:23-27 and *True Christian Religion* #413 and parts of #415