

# Three Legs of a Stool

Mark 12: 28-34

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Leviticus 19: 18

Christianity is not about answering the question, “What is Christianity?” It is about asking, “How do I become a Christian?” Christianity is not so much a philosophy. It is a way of life. Christian books that ask the question, “How do I become a Christian?” are the ones that are memorable and powerful.

We make the point over and over again that Jesus is our head, that Jesus is our cornerstone. Obviously, to become a Christian means to follow Jesus. But, how do we follow Jesus? There are as many answers to this question as there are people in church today.

If I were to try to answer this eternal question, “How do we follow Jesus?” I would begin with the greatest commandment. Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was or what the blueprint for living was and Jesus answered, “The greatest commandment is this.” “Hear O Israel the Lord your God is one, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Duet. 6:4, Levi. 19:18) When Jesus spoke these words he was summing up all the law and the prophets. His words were taken from our readings today in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. This greatest commandment is the essence of Christianity. This is the measuring rod for all of our actions as Christians. This is the cornerstone of the Christian life—of what it means to be a Christian. The first commandment, which Jesus embodied, is the power of the Gospel. It is Jesus’ love that convinced the disciples and later the world that he is God in human form. If we are loving people, then people recognize us as true Christians. Of course as human beings we are limited and we do not measure up to the law of love all the time. But this is the goal.

The essence of the greatest commandment is summed up for me by a woman I visited in Montana who read the Bible every morning and was a devoted Christian her entire life. This woman said that the core of her Christian faith was like the three legs of a stool. She said the first leg was to love God, the second was to love neighbor, and the third was to love self.

Let us start with the love of self. I start here because this leg is the one that is most often neglected in teaching the greatest commandment. Yet, without this leg the stool cannot stand. Unless we are true to ourselves, unless we hold our heads up high and respect ourselves, unless we love ourselves, how can we expect to love others? Jesus’ greatest commandment says “love your neighbor as your self.” “Yourself” is part of the equation, knowing that we are children of God, standing up for our self worth and dignity.

I remember a talk I heard by a Tibetan teacher when I was living in Berkeley. One of the people in the audience asked a question of the teacher about self-hatred. When the teacher heard this question he turned to his translator and asked him for clarification. The translator went on for some time back and forth with the teacher in Tibetan. Then the teacher fell silent. After a time he said that this concept of self-hatred was completely new for him and that he was stumped by it. He asked the woman to ask her question again and then he fell silent again. He said that in Tibet the idea of self-hatred is completely foreign and that he did not know how to respond—that he would have to think about it some more.

Our society has become dominated by ideals of beauty that we see in the media and by ideals of success. And, people who do not live up to the ideals, often experience some level of self-hatred. We live in such a competitive society and our children often receive subliminal and direct messages that they are not adequate—that they are not worthy of love.

I often hear women talking about their weight and about their figure and putting themselves down because of their size. When I was in Africa I didn't hear women making these remarks about themselves. I think it is because on African billboards and television advertisements female models come in all shapes and sizes. There is not one standard of beauty. In Africa, all the various shapes and sizes of the female form are considered beautiful.

We love ourselves because God first loved us. We love ourselves not in a self-centered way. We love ourselves for God's sake because God first loved us. It doesn't matter what size or shape or color or background we come from. We cannot be servants to others unless we take good care of ourselves. We cannot listen to others until we have taken the time to listen to the deep stirrings in our own souls. We cannot attend to others needs unless we first take care of our selves.

Another leg of the stool is "love of neighbor." September 11<sup>th</sup> and the myriad violent events that followed have increased distrust and hostility the world over. Yet, may we always remember that the Christian life is a journey from hostility to hospitality. If we react to any of our neighbors with hostility it shows our own weakness. Hospitality is the true sign of strength. We live in this world and we have primitive instincts so we cannot help but sink into the climate of fear and aggression now and then. But as long as we come back to the law of love we will return to our Christian roots and to sanity.

What is the most important thing I do in ministry? Is it administration, emptying the in-box, being at my desk at certain hours...No, the most important thing I do in ministry is that I care about people and that I see all people as people—that I have a heart for all the people. It is this intention that is at the root of any ministry. And in this work of seeing people as people we are called to reach out to all—to have a heart for all. Having a heart for all is easier said than done. Most people are good at loving some of their neighbors. But few are good at loving all their neighbors. Loving all our neighbors means coming to terms with all the messiness of humanity. It means getting mixed up in people's lives in the world. It means coming to terms with dismal statistics around suicide, aids, domestic abuse, addiction, child abuse, mental illness, and disease. Many churches try to stay above the fray of all this and to leave all dismal statistics at the door. But, when we do that we are not in the world as Jesus calls us to be in the world. To love our neighbors means not running from our neighbors problems. It means walking with people through the valley of the shadow of death. The love of Jesus gives us the courage and the strength to walk through those valleys out of love for our neighbors.

A member of our church told me a story... She has a friend with a drinking problem who was having a really rough time. So she took him in for a while until he could get back on his feet again. Then she went to his apartment and threw out all the liquor in his cabinets and the beers in his refrigerator. When he got back to his apartment some of her friends said that throwing out all his liquor was the wrong thing to do. That she shouldn't try to control him and that he doesn't have long to live. According to her friends drinking would reduce his pain as he reaches the end of life. She asked me what I thought the right thing to do was. I said I didn't know what was right in this situation. But, the most important thing is that he knows he is cared for. Sometimes with the best intentions, we make mistakes and we do the wrong thing. We are all fallible. We are all human. But the most important thing is that underneath it all we genuinely care about people—that we have a good heart. A good heart cannot be imitated. If we have one it will shine through. It is what people need. They need to know that there are people who care about them—that they are loved.

Another leg of the stool is the love of God. For me the love of God is primarily about loving our faith tradition—asking not what our faith can do for us, but what we can do for our faith. To love God is to love faith in God passed down to us—to not give up on our faith, but to keep working at it--to love our church and to serve it.

Knowing about the love of Jesus and acting on that love is not something that takes place on a grand scale. It takes place in daily down to earth ways that affirm our deep inter-connectedness. We love God through worship. We love ourselves by taking good care of ourselves. We love our neighbors through sincere caring acts. This is the essence of the Christian journey.

Each of the three legs of this stool could take up several sermons. They are basic points that anchor our faith—that we return to again and again.

Each of the three legs of this stool we have talked about is indispensable to our faith. The three legs compliment each other—we can't serve our neighbor without loving our self or we will experience burnout. We cannot truly love ourselves without serving our neighbors because personal fulfillment and joy is about serving others. And we cannot sustain our service towards others without the love of God, which sustains the life of service. Each leg of the stool supports the other. If one leg is missing the stool is no longer functional.

I celebrate the love of God, neighbor, and self. May this love shine forth from our lives and from our worship! May we be compassionate and forgiving towards ourselves and others! May we celebrate God's love together with commitment and passion as we worship! May they know we are Christians by our love!

Amen