



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

The answer in the back of the book

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Emily Post published the first version of her manual on manners in 1922. Maybe you were made to study it like the word of the Lord of propriety at some point in your Southern cotillion upbringing — or maybe you ranged about like a wild mongrel, slouching one day into a used book store to find this curiosity where you opened it with an untamed laugh, reading about the intricacies of napkin folding and attracting men with flower arrangements or the delicate dance of how a roast should be served in a home that had (if you can stomach the very ideal!) no help. With each entry, your laugh faded as your mouth hung open in an entirely unmannerly way. Throughout her life Emily Post gave specific instruction to the most detailed of circumstances. And yet, if you boiled this all down, she said, it came down to two sentences: “Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter what fork you use.”¹

Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa Theologicae* in the 15th century. You can buy the full set for about as much as it will take you to buy a bookshelf sturdy enough to support it. It consists of about 3000 articles answering 10,000 questions/objections to the Christian faith. And yet it’s unfinished. Before he died, St. Thomas quit writing. No one is exactly sure what happened; it seems he had some sort of vision of God; it took his words when it left him. A friend urged Thomas to continue on writing the *Summa*, but he replied, “The end of my labors has come. All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me.”²

A lawyer approaches Jesus in our gospel. He’s sent by the Pharisees, a group of faithful people devoted to the 613 rules in the Scripture. You’ve read those rules, right? They’re mostly in Leviticus. They elaborate on the kind of goat acceptable for a sacrifice, the bird exchange rate if you can’t spare a goat. There are beautiful rules about how to welcome strangers and neighbors, along with commands to protect the poor and weak members of your society, mixed in with elaborate commentaries on discharge that you can’t unread.

The lawyer approaches Jesus and asks him what’s most important of all that. Jesus quotes Jewish Scripture back to him: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength. Then he quotes that book of rules and regulations, Leviticus: and love your neighbor as yourself. (To be more specific, Leviticus commands that you love the alien, the stranger, as yourself.) On these two commandments hang all that other work — everything else.

And maybe it’s just me, but I hear this verse quite a lot from folks; among Jesus’ greatest hits, this one definitely has the most traction in mainline Protestantism. Which is funny in one way, as if Jesus were saying something radical and new rather than this being an example of two Jews distilling their Scripture.

¹ Which is all well and good until you sit down at a dinner party and of the 8 glasses surrounding your plate, you manage to take your neighbor’s.

² And yet this work, Thomas’ straw, is the backbone of Christian thinking. Everything we profess to believe finds itself in his magnum opus.

But it seems like you hear this quoted in a way that makes it seem so simple. As in, so long as people know that Christianity is about love, then that's it. If you just focus on love, then the rest falls in place.

I don't know. I've interacted with lots of Christians now and we've got all pretty different ideas of what "love" looks like. For example: Love is a feeling of warmth toward others that I maintain (even when they're rude.) Love is an action expressed in making a better society. Love makes me put up with someone else's behavior quietly, or love is what makes me tell them their behavior is harmful. Love is being authentically you, or love is the sensitivity to others that makes you alter your manners accordingly. Love makes me more open to others, or love makes me more defensive of those I cherish. And these opposing definitions of love clash, all over the world, in every society; even in a little Memphis church, even right in my own wayward heart.

Sometimes I hear "love" used as a panacea; e.g., just add love and it'll be better. I think anyone who has spent any time in a family with others understands the demands and complications and sacrifices of real love. I'm always suspicious when love looks like the path of least resistance, when it's easy on us, when it's easy for us. Anything worth doing is difficult, and if love is the thing most worth doing, it does follow that it would be the most difficult.

So I admit: sometimes I wish Jesus was a little more specific. Love is the answer in the back of the book, but in calculus, you had to show pages of work on how you got to the answer. Emily Post went through every scenario before telling you to be sensitive; Aquinas thought out every answer before saying one taste of the glory of God made human knowledge like straw; Jesus knew all of the Scripture before he could say that these two things could interpret it all. He didn't just arrive there, dropped like some love guru from the sky.

You might expect me, as the priest with the word "formation" in her title, to challenge you to consider the ways the easy answer has made you feel like the process of discovery could be disregarded, as though the answer "God is love" checks some cosmic Sunday School attendance box. But it comes from my experience, too, that one of the things folks find most frustrating about the Episcopal Church — or at least the really earnest ones who come in looking for answers, having been given answers before — is that they want them from us.

And a Summa Theologicae is exactly what we don't have. I don't know if you realize this, but our catechism is a slim little volume at the back of the prayer book, a good read for the basics of what it means to be Episcopalian, but not exhaustive.

There's a reason it's like this. The Anglican tradition was born in a time where we swung from Protestant leaders, back to Catholic leaders, back to Protestant-ish, then went through Civil Wars with the Puritans. And the body didn't break apart. It made us unique: we began to say that it wasn't thinking the same way or holding the same tenets that made us who we are, it was our ability to keep praying together that mattered. It wasn't dispensing an unassailable monolith of reasoning that everyone had to subscribe to, though your reason matters deeply in your being formed in the image of Christ. It didn't mean we had a manual of behavior that determined who was in or who was out, though your actions are paramount in determining the trajectory of your soul. Our unity is in our prayers, in our creeds.

It's a sort of beautiful and terrible freedom you're given around here. You're handed the tools of Scripture, tradition, and reason, and are told to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. But it's not the answer in the back of the book that God is looking for. What does it mean to love God with your whole self? It's your life that's the answer.