

All For One

Alexandre Dumas' historical novel, *The Three Musketeers* has been cartoonized almost into absurdity. Originally it was a very serious work, published during the furor leading up to the third French revolution in 1848.

Although primarily an adventure novel, Dumas uses the plot to address various injustices, abuses and absurdities of the old regime, adding his voice to the debate between those who favored the monarchy (basically the aristocracy and the landed gentry), and those who longed for a republic.

What most of us remember from the novel is the motto adopted by the heroes, "One for all and all for one!"

Spock, the Vulcan First Officer of the Starship Enterprise, often said, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." Ayn Rand would vigorously disagree, saying the needs of the individual give rise to the possibility of value judgments in the first place.

The debate has raged unabated and without consensus resolution since - who knows when - at least since the emergence of the Greek City States. Individual rights vs. the public good. Free enterprise vs. Socialism.

The framers of our Constitution sought a balance between the two poles, setting forth as the purposes of the Constitution: "to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,"

A week ago, last Friday, in his inaugural address, President Trump established the theme of his presidency: "America First." I want to affirm that; but with a caveat.

Most of us have flown commercial airlines. As soon as the plane is pushed back from the gate, an attendant comes on the intercom and explains that, if the cabin becomes depressurized, oxygen masks will drop down from above. After demonstrating how to put the mask on, he/or she always says, "Put on your own oxygen mask first, before helping others."

There's a reason for that. Before we can help others, we must be conscious and in control of our faculties. Without that oxygen mask in a depressurized cabin, we would be unconscious in a matter of seconds—unable to help anybody else. It is in that sense that I affirm President Trump's theme: "America First". We take care of our own needs first, so we can take care of others—especially, those who are most vulnerable—those who cannot take care of themselves.

I fully understand—and don't really disagree with—the idea, “Take care of the people across the street before we take care of people across the ocean.” The problem is, when that is our primary vision, the vision virtually never broadens beyond, “Us First.”

But, as followers of Jesus, we have a model for living out that ideal.

MATTHEW 22:34-40 (NRSV) *When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

“...the second is like it... Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus is quoting Leviticus 19:18; except, the Leviticus passage puts it this way: “*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*”

Jesus puts a new spin on it: he omits any reference to “any of your people”; instead, he recognizes no fences around the word, neighbor: no unworthiness, no ethnic or national heritage, no barriers of class or culture or gender can render a person less than a neighbor.

In Luke, when Jesus says, “love your neighbor as yourself,” the questioner asks, point-blank, “Who is my neighbor?”

Many of you will remember Jesus' response—a story about a man—a Jewish man—serving and caring for a Samaritan man who was wounded and robbed. Samaritans were hated by the Jews.

Who is my neighbor? Who am I required to love? Jesus' response: “Everyone for whom you have opportunity and resources to love.”

Love your neighbor—as yourself. We still have difficulty with this one. Self-love is not a comfortable concept. It sounds too much like self-centeredness or selfishness; it too easily implies egotism and narcissism; it indicates insensitivity and a lack of consideration for others. And yet, here it is: reported on the lips of Jesus: “Love your neighbor—as yourself.”

Halford Luccock, teacher of preaching at Yale Divinity School from the 30s through the 60s, wrote the exposition of Matthew's Gospel in *The Interpreter's Bible*. Responding to the inference of narcissism in this verse, he wrote, “We are obligated to develop under God what God has given.”

The Broadway song, “I Gotta' Be Me”, made popular by Sammy Davis, Jr., includes the lyrics, “*I can't be right for somebody else If I'm not right for me.*”

The United States Army recruitment logo in the 80s and 90s was, "Be All That You Can Be!"

The Airline Attendant says, "Put on your own oxygen mask first."

"Love your neighbor as yourself." This second commandment is set up by the first, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second is like it.*"

"The second is like it." Loving one's neighbor as oneself is compared equally with loving God. And Jesus concludes, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." For Jesus, nothing else is needed. These two commandments are a complete set: a universal standard by which all Christians and all churches can measure their Missional Purpose: Love God; Love Neighbor as Yourself.

I saw a church marquee this week that said, "All for the Glory of God." Beautiful words; but incomplete. We have not finished loving God—we have not finished loving and giving glory to God—until we have loved our neighbor as ourself.

In this vision, both Spock's dictum, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few," and Ayn Rand's axiom that "the needs of the individual give rise to the possibility of value judgments in the first place," become irrelevant. That debate too easily becomes a smoke screen behind which to avoid the real issue, which is this: We are called to do all the above!

Without implying any political affirmation, it's true: "It Takes a Village!" and yet, no village is stronger than the individuals who are its citizens.

In our Motivating Vision we see us becoming a church that acknowledges, enables and encourages the journey of each person in the fulfillment of the calling to which God has called him or her.

The airline attendant says, "Put on your own oxygen mask first;" but the clear implication is that we do so IN ORDER TO help others.

The Three Musketeers got it right: "One for all and all for one!"