

Sunday, October 25, 2020
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 25 (Year A)

Matthew 22.34-46

St. Gregory's, Long Beach

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1094788297605460/>

(Sermon begins at about 13:15)

“Love God. Love Others. Everything Else Takes Care of Itself”

The temple authorities are at it again. Setting up yet another test for Jesus. Another hoop for him to jump through in their attempt to prove that he is a heretic. In today's Gospel we hear the third and final in a series of such tests. The first, which we heard last week, was devised by the Pharisees in league with the Herodians: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (Mt 22.17). Then, in a section that our lectionary skips over, the Sadducees, who don't believe in resurrection, ask Jesus a ridiculous question about marriage in the afterlife—the one about one bride for seven brothers. And then today, the Pharisees are back with “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Mt 22.36).

Now, on the surface, the question is a reasonable one. It was common practice in Jesus' time for Jewish scholars to debate which of the 613 commandments was the greatest. A mental exercise to determine which of the commandments sums up the essence of the Law.¹ What is nefarious about this question is the intent in asking it—looking for something, anything, that could be used against Jesus.

As always, Jesus is astute and recognizes what is going on; what is behind the question. And, as always, Jesus carefully crafts a response that will blow his questioners out of the water. He does this not by providing one, but two commandments. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Mt 22.37-39).

The first of these is actually a portion, a summation, of the Shema: “Hear O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6.4-5). The Shema was generally considered to be a leading contender for greatest commandment, as it was so central to the life and liturgical practices of the Jewish people. The context of the section of Deuteronomy containing the Shema is that love of God is manifest in “keeping all God's decrees and commandments, so that your days may be long” (Deut 6.2). In other words, God is giving the people these commandments as a guide for vibrant, healthy communal life.² As one commentator notes, the Shema is effectively “God's purpose statement for God's people,”³ almost a confession of faith, as it were. In fact, the Shema is such an integral part of Jewish life that it is recited at daily morning and evening worship services. I guess it would be akin to our recitation of both the Apostles Creed and the Lord's Prayer at our morning and evening prayer services.

The second commandment cited by Jesus, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is a truncated version of a commandment that reads: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19.18). This was actually considered a relatively minor one of the 613 commandments that God gave to Moses. While considered to be minor, it is representative of the broader context of Leviticus chapter 19, which focuses on such things as leaving gleanings in the field for the poor and for immigrants; and refraining from dishonesty, stealing, mistreating the disabled, corruption, slander, hatred, and vengeance. A whole section of the Law addressing ritual and moral holiness—about living a life of holiness. In this, “holiness is understood as more than just ethical excellence; it is behavior that imitates God’s behavior.”⁴ Since God loves his people, we should, too.

Even more so, inclusion of the commandment about loving one’s neighbor carries particular weight in Jesus’ ongoing criticism of the temple authorities. “Leviticus 19 offers an extensive vision of a world marked by just human relations and practical care. Jesus has demonstrated this vision in his ministry and has criticized the [temple] leaders for failing to do so.”⁵ All those times he condemned the temple authorities, all those times he called them hypocrites, were really in response to them not following the commandment to love their neighbors. Not that they intentionally ignored that commandment. As the temple authorities, they were so focused on doing everything right to demonstrate their love of God. But love of neighbor? Not so much. Jesus’ primary criticism of them was that their single-minded focus on adhering to the law was a burden on many of the people. Particularly the poor and the marginalized. Requiring that they pay the temple tax and pay for temple sacrifices when they barely had enough money to feed their families. How is that demonstrating love of neighbor? If anything, their obsession with the laws meant to demonstrate love of God did little to demonstrate love of neighbor.

I suppose the reason Jesus responds with two commandments as opposed to one is that he wants to be sure to completely cover his bases. Now, admittedly, trying to narrow 613 commandments down to one is a difficult task. There is so much potential for missing something important. For offending one faction or another. If Jesus were merely to focus on love of God, he could be criticized for not caring for God’s creation and the needs of humanity, which is obviously of importance to the Jewish people, as so many of the commandments deal with right relationship with others. And if he chose to focus on love of neighbor or some aspect of that, Jesus would certainly be accused of denying the primacy of God in the lives of the people. He could even be accused of blasphemy for not choosing to focus on God. So, weaving the two commandments together cleverly and skillfully avoids these potential pitfalls. Bringing the two together serves to cover all the bases. And really, that is what the life of faith should be about. Loving God and all God’s creation.

Aside from the intent behind the question asked of Jesus—“which commandment in the law is the greatest?”—the question is actually a good one, worth careful consideration. As one commentator puts it, “If we want to practice our faith or put faith into practice, where to begin? If we want daily life to reflect our relationship with God and show gratitude for that relationship, which of the commandments of God is most important? With so many from which to choose, how do we land on the most essential thing, the command that rests at the heart of them all?”⁶

In bringing together these two commandments—loving God and loving your neighbor—Jesus is really telling us that if we want to love God with our whole being, with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, we need to practice loving our neighbor. And if we want to know how to love our neighbor, we need to practice loving God. If we love God, we love what God loves. We love what is of concern to God. And that is all his creation. Particularly that part of creation that is made in the image of God: our fellow human beings, our neighbors. And conversely, if we love our neighbor, we are showing love for the God who created our neighbor. So, if we are doing it right, loving God leads to loving our neighbor, which in turn leads to loving God, and so on and so on and so on in a never-ending cycle. In this respect, the two commandments Jesus lifts up—love of God and love of neighbor—are inextricably linked. You really cannot have one without the other. You cannot love one without the other. As is written in 1 John: “for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 Jn 4.20b).

Jesus wraps up his answer by noting, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22.40). This is significant. He is making it clear that these two commandments are not just the greatest or most significant. They are that. Combined, these two commandments summarize all the remaining laws. Even more so, these two commandments encapsulate all the remaining commandments. All the other commandments are merely case-specific instances of the overarching commandments to love God and love neighbor. Furthermore, the term “the law and the prophets” was a way of talking about all the Hebrew Scripture. There was the law, but the prophets, in the broadest sense, tells the story of God’s interactions with God’s people. How they lived according to the Law, or not. And how, even when they did not live according to the Law, God continued to love them and sought ways to bring about reconciliation. To bring the people back into right relationship with God and into conformity with the Covenant. And to bring the people back into right relationship with one another. In effect, in stating that “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets,” Jesus is saying that this is all that is needed to live according to the ancient Covenant between God and his people. He could have just as easily said, “on these two commandments hang right relationship with God and his creation.” Or maybe even better, “do these two things and everything else takes care of itself.”

We talk a lot—or rather, I preach a lot—about the importance of these two commandments. They are such a foundational part of who we are as followers of Christ. But we hear about them so much that sometimes I fear they become part of the background. Part of the ambient noise, as we become so focused on the work of our particular ministries. Sometimes we need to step back and remind ourselves just what is behind those particular ministries. Why we do what we do. Because what we do is important. But only to the extent that what we do in this place and in the other areas of our lives are consistent with and further the goals of proclaiming and spreading the love of God—God’s love for us and our love for God—in ways that demonstrate love for others.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. If we all kept these commandments first and foremost in our thoughts and particularly in our actions, think how much better the world would be.

¹ “The Two Kinds of Love: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Twenty-First Week After Pentecost,” SALT, October 20, 2020. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/10/19/two-kinds-of-love-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-first-week-after-pentecost>.

² “The Two Kinds of Love.”

³ Audrey West, “Living by the Word: October 25, 30A (Matthew 22:34-46), The Christian Century, September 29, 2020. https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/october-25-30a-matthew-2234-46?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=5a88cbad72-46?utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-5a88cbad72-82349099.

⁴ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 173.

⁵ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*,” 1787.

⁶ Audrey West.