

October 29, 2023  
Pentecost 21 – Proper 25A  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Deuteronomy 34:1-12*

*Psalms 90:1-6, 13-17*

*1 Thessalonians 2:1-8*

*Matthew 22:34-46*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father,  
and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Let us begin with a few moments of silence to offer to God our lament and grief over the shootings in Maine, the ongoing violence in Israel and Palestine, and in Ukraine. Pray for the souls of those who have been killed, and those who mourn them. Amen.

+ + +

Today's Gospel takes place on a fateful day. According to Matthew's narrative, this is the day after Jesus entered the city in triumph, after which went to the Temple and threw out the money changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals.

This day, what we would call Monday, Jesus is back in the Temple precincts, teaching about judgement and grace through the parables we've heard over the past several weeks. Jesus' opponents were always part of the crowd. In this morning's reading, we enter the scene toward the end of a series of encounters with antagonists who were asking Jesus very pointed questions. As Matthew relates the events, there are three questions. In tag-team fashion, each group strives to be the one that really, finally, gets him.

The first question, which we heard last week, was from the Pharisees and the Herodians about paying taxes to Caesar. The second question, posed by a group of Sadducees, was about the resurrection. These were the Sadducees Jesus had silenced. This morning, from a lawyer who was also a Pharisee, we have the final question. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Whew, we say. We know this one! It's in the Prayer Book! The answer trips off our tongue! We are to love God with all our being, and our neighbors as ourselves. Easy-peasy, right? But wait – more questions start to pop up. How do we love? Whom do we love? It seems like Jesus has just asked us more questions.

My friend Andrew McGowan offers this observation: "I do not think there is any place in the Gospels where Jesus merely answers a question neatly so as to satisfy the hearer and allow them to go away with a neat package of how-to's to make life better or easier or more fulfilling. Rather he always turns the question back somehow to the starting place of the

questioner, probing them in unexpected and perhaps unwelcome ways.”<sup>1</sup> This, my friends, is how Jesus answers the questions we ask.

Let’s notice what Jesus does not say. Remember again where we are, and what’s happening. Decisions about solving the “Jesus Problem” have already been made. Death is close at hand; he doesn’t have much time. When he’s asked what matters most, he does not say, “Believe the right things.” Or “Maintain personal and doctrinal purity.” Or “Worship like this or attend a church like that.” He doesn’t even say, “Read your Bible,” or “Pray every day.”

He does say, “Love.” That’s it. At the crossroads of life and death, Jesus tells us everything we need to know about life in God; boiled down to its essence. *Love*. Love God; love your neighbor as yourself. So...how? Who? More questions.

In his final “debate” with the Pharisees, they ask which commandment is THE greatest. Jesus, perhaps an Anglican before his time, gives a both/and answer.

Jesus first cites Deuteronomy 6:5, the second half of the Shema, the bedrock creedal statement of Judaism. *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.* These are words that every Jew knows. But he doesn’t stop there.

When Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*, he establishes an interpretive lens<sup>2</sup> that announces his own faith and shapes ours forever. Because these two verses shape our faith, it’s worth a short walk through some words that might get lost in translation: love, heart, soul, and might. Our trail guide today is my good friend The Rev. Dr. Becky Wright, who teaches Hebrew and Old Testament at The University of the South. I will take the blame for any missteps on our tour.

Let us begin with **love**. In this case, love is not about emotion or romantic love. The Hebrew verb should better be translated “loyal.” Emotions cannot be commanded; loyalty can be.

“You shall be loyal to the Lord your God...”

**Heart.** All cultures and languages seem to use body parts figuratively. In English, we “love” in our “heart,” maybe to the bottom of it, even though we know the heart pumps blood. In Hebrew, the heart stands for the place of thinking and decision making rather than emotions.

“You shall be loyal to the Lord your God in all your thinking and all your decisions...”

**Soul.** This is trickier for us. The Hebrew word we usually translate as “soul” is *nephesh*. *Nephesh* is what makes something alive, sentient, as distinct from a plant; it also makes every individual unique. You may not be able to tell one sparrow from another, but God can.

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew McGowan, *What’s the Question?* July 24, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Or, an interpretive principle, a “canon within the canon.”

“You shall be loyal to the Lord your God in all your thinking and all your decisions and all your aliveness and all your uniqueness...”

**Strength.** We think of strength as an attribute. In Hebrew, it’s an adverb, akin to “muchly” or “strongly.” Following this commandment takes determination.

“You shall be loyal to the Lord your God in all your thinking and all your decision-making and all your aliveness and all your uniqueness and work at it.”

It’s not quite Prayer Book language, but it packs a wallop.

Our next stop is the second “greatest” commandment *love your neighbor as yourself*. You’ve heard me preach this as “love your neighbor in the same way that you are loved.” Lately, though, I’ve learned that this might not go far enough. This preposition “as” in Hebrew isn’t so much to love your neighbor “to the same extent,” but rather “love your neighbor who is as you are.” Who is as you are. You can almost hear a mic drop.

The Jews in Matthew’s audience would have automatically heard an additional layer of teaching in these words. Because, in Leviticus, the admonition to love neighbor is repeated, with the same vocabulary, and applied to the alien (v. 33). *You shall love the alien who is as you are*. And, to drive the point home, the verse continues, *for you were aliens in Egypt*.

+++

Why am I spending all this time today looking at words, at these words in particular? The reason is to shine a bright light on how Jesus answered this question about the greatest commandment. Matthew tells us that this was the last question they asked him. It’s a bit like Final Jeopardy – there’s a lot riding on the answer.

When the lawyer asked which commandment was the greatest, Jesus wasn’t choosing from the list of ten that we think of; the Law contains 613 commandments. That Jesus chose Deuteronomy 6:5, *you shall love the Lord your God &c.*, seems like a slam dunk. Then he amplified it with *love your neighbor as yourself*. What if he had chosen, say, something just ten verses away, *you shall not tattoo any marks upon you* (Lev 19:28)? We would have an entirely different religion.

In summing up the Law as he did, Jesus is telling us something important; he is offering to us a lens through which we are called to see and interpret everything. *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*. We are called to put an effort into being loyal to God with everything in our God-given humanity; and to honor neighbor and stranger – because we have all been neighbors and strangers.

In this final exchange in the Temple, Jesus is calling us into community, into a community that God desires and dreams for us, into a sense of inclusive humanity rather than the damnable and endless divisions of us and them. With the tragic news from Ukraine, from Israel and Palestine, from Lewiston, Maine, and from countless other places far and near, the gospel of loving neighbor and stranger because *they are as we are* is more important than ever.

Can anything I say from this place cause peace to break out across the globe? I'm guessing not, but perhaps we might start at home.

I offer you this notion: you will never look into the eyes of someone God hates. Sit with that for a moment...

We Episcopalians talk about seeking and serving Christ in all persons. Biblical love is not passive; biblical love is something we do. Loving one's neighbor is, of course, partly about the list of things you all know well: sock drives, Gathering Grace, checking in with fellow parishioners, and the like.

Perhaps more importantly, loving one's neighbor is about learning to see everyone else, the very next neighbor or stranger, as a child of God. When you do this (and it takes diligence), you help to weave together the human family more tightly. And the question of "how will I survive whatever might happen" becomes "how might we build a new way of being." That new way of being is what we call the Kingdom of God.

Whatever the question, the answer is love, the very essence of God, which is alive and active in this place.

+ + +

Jeremy Taylor was an English priest and writer who, somehow, managed to navigate the bloody horrors of the English Civil Wars. In his book *Holy Living* he wrote, "Love is the greatest thing that God can give us; for he himself is love; and it is the greatest thing we can give to God; for it will also give ourselves and carry with it all that is ours. The apostle [Paul, Col 3:14] calls it the band of perfection; it is the old, and it is the new, and it is the great commandment, and it is all the commandments; for it is the fulfilling of the law."<sup>3</sup>

Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> From Jeremy Taylor, *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living* (1650).