

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 25-A (25 October 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2020-10-22 Thu 16:33>

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46¹

Track 2: Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18²

1 Final Arguments

'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.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.³

Jesus is spending the final days of his life and ministry in the Temple in Jerusalem, and we have found out why he hadn't spent much time there before. All the different political parties, vying for power, are in a tizzy. Because somehow, this man from the countryside is a threat to all of them. Even the Pharisees, whom you would think had the most in common with Jesus, are upset. New Testament scholar Raj Nadella points out that, "Jesus has been interpreting the Law, as did the Pharisees, but his ability and proclivity to interpret it with clarity, integrity and commitment to needs of the people at the margins made him a forceful voice and a threat to their authority and popularity."⁴

So the Pharisees come to Jesus with one final question, Final Jeopardy, as it were. They ask him, "Which is the greatest commandment in the law?" What's most important? What is the essence of the Torah? How would you summarize everything we need to know about God and life and the universe?

And Jesus has an answer. Sometimes we like to summarize that answer with four words: "Love God, Love neighbor." I guess it's actually only three words because half of the words are "Love." As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says with great regularity, "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

¹As with many other churches, The Episcopal Church uses the Revised Common Lectionary for its Sunday morning readings. We are currently using Lectionary Year "A" in which there is focus on the Gospel of Matthew.

²At St. Thomas' we have been using Track 1, with "semi-continuous" readings from the Hebrew Bible. This week I'm asking that we use Track 2 because it provides the source from which Jesus is quoting in the Gospel reading.

³Mt 22.37-40 NRSV

⁴Raj Nadella, "Commentary on Matthew 22:34-46," https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4650

2 Love God

Jesus begins with the single command that every observant Jew utters every day, both in his time and even down to our own. It's the "Sh'ma" from Deuteronomy chapter 6: *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.*⁵

Jesus affirms that the most important thing to know about life, the universe, and everything, is the central importance of loving God. Not just loving God with mental assent or a verbal affirmation. Loving God with everything you have: heart, soul, and strength. Mind, spirit, and body. Time, talent, and treasure. Everything you've got. More than what you give to your job. More than what you give to church. More than what you give to your mother or father, your spouse or your child. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, that is more important than loving God.

And here's the fascinating thing about loving God. The love of God is a love that frees. It's a love that frees us from every other concern, every other worry, every other obligation. I'm not talking about a health and wealth Gospel, as if loving God with sufficient focus is going to get you a promotion and a Cadillac, protect you from Covid, and make your kids start taking out the trash without being asked. But to love God with my whole self is to depend on God with my whole self. To love God completely is to no longer depend on other sources of happiness or security or satisfaction. To love God whole-heartedly is to be able to receive that promotion with joy – and also to endure getting laid off without going off the deep end. It is to be able to enjoy the seasons of life when I might have a nice car, a fancy motorcycle – and to be content and unperturbed when I have to make do with something less. It is to rejoice when my children are helpful and when they find success – but also to be present, able, and receptive when they encounter hard times and don't seem willing to follow the path I would prefer for them.

Because that's the way that God loves us, too.

So, "Love God" may summarize the beginning of Jesus' response. But despite the Pharisees' wishes, Jesus doesn't just stop with that. It's not just, "Go to church, do liturgy, don't worry about the people." Instead Jesus follows up quickly: *This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*⁶ This is where things get really interesting.

3 Love Neighbor

If "Love God" was from the *Sh'ma*, "Love neighbor" is from the book of Leviticus. Jesus continues to refer to Scripture in his response to the Pharisees. Leviticus 19 begins with God's command, *You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*⁷ That's a pretty tall order! But the chapter goes on to explain what that means. In just this one chapter of Leviticus, we learn that being holy means respecting your parents, taking care of your body, paying attention to how you eat, caring for the poor, telling the truth, practicing economic justice, embracing immigrants, caring for the elderly, avoiding an excessively extractive relationship with the earth, avoiding slander, not harboring hatred, speaking frankly, not taking revenge and not bearing grudges. Right in the middle of all these things God commands, "you will love your neighbor as yourself."

⁵Dt 6.4f. NRSV

⁶Mt 22.39 NRSV

⁷Lev 19.2 NRSV

In Leviticus 19, God is describing what it means to live as a community among whom God can be found. What it might mean, today, to be the church. And Jesus is explaining to the Pharisees that when people love God, you can see it in how they treat one another.

4 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

So Jesus answers the Pharisees, embroiled as they are in politics and power. His response is to love God and to love neighbor.

I think Jesus speaks to us in our present moment. A jostling in politics and power is going on. I hear people saying this is the most important election of our lifetime. That the stakes are high. Perhaps they are. So please do vote, and vote thoughtfully, and vote in a way that expresses the love of God acting through you.

But here's what Jesus says:

Love God more than anything else. That anxiety you feel about the election? Love God instead. Are you going to be OK because a particular politician won a particular race? Or a particular party wields power in a certain way? Or are you going to be OK because God is sovereign, God is in charge, God is powerful, and God loves you? Don't let an election get between you and God.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Does your Facebook feed demonstrate your love for your neighbor? Do your emails and your phone calls demonstrate your love, your genuine affection, for your neighbor? Do your words, the serious ones and the joking ones, demonstrate your love for, your care for, your profound respect for, all of your neighbors, people around the world and even in your own family who each of them bear the image of God imprinted on their souls?

Loving God frees us from relying on anything else to make things OK. Loving God liberates us from fear and anxiety about secondary things. When we can commit all things, our country, our jobs, our homes, our children, our very selves, into God's care, then we can face whatever comes with the sure knowledge that we have built our house on the rock, with a sure foundation.

Amid all the tizzy of politics and power, Jesus offers us a different path. A path that is unshakable by the daily news or even by the movement of nations. A sure path, a path of belonging, a path that allows to encounter every circumstance, good, bad, or indifferent, knowing that we are held securely in the loving arms of God.

Amen.