

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 26-B (31 Oct 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Time-stamp: <2021-10-31 Sun 08:57>

Collect

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Ruth 1:1-18, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9:11-14, Mark 12:28-34

1 What thing that's less than love will you settle for?

“What thing that's less than love will you settle for?”

It's the most un-romantic question ever, isn't it. It's an admission: I don't love you, I'm not going to love you, I just want to know how we can live together without anybody getting hurt. As if the lack of love isn't hurtful. As if the lack of love won't have serious, soul-crushing consequences. As if the veneer of respectability behind which the questioner seeks to hide isn't doing silent violence to everyone connected to that relationship, that family.

“What thing that's less than love will you settle for?”

That's the question that has been at the center of our Gospel readings for weeks now. Last month when Jesus began teaching his disciples about his coming death and resurrection, Peter couldn't handle it, couldn't love a Jesus that was different from his own imagination and longing. Peter rebuked Jesus, earning a response where Jesus called him “Satan” or “adversary.” The next week we read about Jesus trying again, and all the disciples could do was argue about which of them was the greatest. Again the next week, as October began, we had the story of someone doing works of healing in Jesus' name, acts of love which made the disciples intensely jealous. The week after that it was the Pharisees asking about divorcing their wives based on technicalities instead of being committed to loving relationships. The following week we talked about the rich man who allowed his many possessions to stand between him and eternal life. Two weeks ago it was James and John angling for positions of power in a coming political system.

Jesus came proclaiming eternal life, a gift of God's love. No one seemed able to hear that until last week. It was a blind man who had the spiritual insight to call out to Jesus, to be healed, and then to follow Jesus without question or hesitation on the dangerous road to Jerusalem. Bartimaeus knew what it meant to be loved, and to love in return.

And so today's Gospel lesson concludes this long, mostly sordid series, with an honest question from a passing scribe. A scribe is all about scripture: he's a Bible scholar, so he asks a Bible question. “Which commandment is the first of all?” You'll note that it wasn't a leading question, a tricking question. It was an open question, an invitation for Jesus to really get to the heart of things. So that's what Jesus does: he responds, quoting Scripture, and going to the very heart of the Gospel.

Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.¹

2 Sh’ma

Jesus asserts there is one God, one supreme being, one creator, exactly one appropriate object of worship and dedication and whole-hearted love. There’s not a competition. There’s not a hierarchy. There’s not a compromise to be made.

Commercials and brands clamor for your loyalty. Computer and smartphone interfaces are carefully crafted to keep your eyeballs focused on them for as many hours as possible through the day. Stores design their lighting, their music, their layouts, to keep you deep in their bellies, adding things to your cart for as long as possible. Processed foods add sugar and salt and fat to keep you coming back for more. Everybody wants a piece of you, your focus, your attention, your time, your effort, your substance.

This has been true for thousands of years. It is Moses that Jesus is quoting, who told the Israelites, “you shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength.”² That last word, “strength” is the Hebrew word “m’od.” When God made the earth and all that is in it, God said it was “tov” or “good.” When God made human beings, God said it was “tov m’od”, very good. That “very” is what we are to use to love God. It encompasses our vitality, our substance, our possessions, our power, and, yes, our strength. All of it, the whole of it, is to be used to love God and nothing else. Our undivided m’od.

This is stewardship. It’s bigger than a pledge to St. Thomas’ – though a pledge to St. Thomas’ can certainly be an important part of it! But it’s bigger than your checkbook or your bank account. It’s bigger than your financial resources or your special skills or your time. Though each of these are important expressions of your “m’od.” But there is only one God, and you are invited to give it all to God. Your whole self, your whole attention, your whole resources. Some of that you may give at church, some of that you may give through your vocation, some of that you may give in how you treat your family or your friends, your enemies or those you never pay attention to at all. This is the kind of command that infiltrates and invades every nook and cranny of a life, leaving no aspect of our persons, of our beings, where it does not apply.

3 Close to the Kingdom of God

So what thing that’s less than love will you settle for? That’s what people keep asking Jesus. And Jesus keeps saying “nothing.” Jesus won’t settle for anything less. Because that would mean something less than life, something less than the Kingdom of God, something less than the great feast of God’s banquet on the mountain where God wipes away every tear. And Jesus won’t settle for anything less than loving you.

¹Mk 12.29–31 NRSV.

²Dt 6.5, my paraphrase.

The scribe in this story answers wisely. Throughout Mark the apostles have come off as second-rate, almost cartoonish in their bumbling. But this scribe knows better. He knows that what Jesus is saying is true, and that such whole-hearted love of God is superior to every external act of sacrifice or offering.

That's why we make our offerings and our pledges not in order to get something from God. We make them as expressions of our love for God, as declarations that there is one God, and we love that God more than we love a few more dollars in our bank accounts each week or each month.

That's why we wear masks when we've been vaccinated or meet outside straight through the freezing winter. Because we love God more than we love our own comfort, and we love our neighbor more than we love our own ease.

Or, at least, we try to!

God won't settle for less than whole-hearted love, with heart, soul, and "m'od," everything, from you and me. That's because God won't settle for less than loving *us* with the totality of *God's* own being.

Our pledges are one little example of how we sanctify God's name and commit our entire selves to God. We do that in response to a God who has dedicated God's entire self to us, even to the point of allowing God's self to be crucified on a tree. By us.

Which commandment is the greatest? The one that leads us into the depths of *utter* and *mutual* self-giving with God. The one where we reserve no part of our selves, our lives, our everything, for any lesser god, any lesser value, any lesser claim on our affection. Because God will not settle for anything less than love for you.

Amen.