

21 Pentecost, Proper 25, Yr. A

October 25, 2020

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18, Matthew 22:34-46

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives a summary of Jewish law in two commandments. This was a favorite Jewish way of teaching. In Jesus' day, there were 613 commandments and it was a common and understandable practice to try to summarize them or at least cite some basic principle. You may remember the story of a man once coming before the Jewish sage Hillel and saying that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel would teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one foot. Hillel took him up on this and said, WHAT IS HATEFUL TO YOU DO NOT DO TO YOUR NEIGHBOR. THAT IS THE WHOLE TORAH. THE REST IS COMMENTARY - GO AND LEARN IT. We might recognize that as the negative way of stating the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And that Rule is sometimes given as one that has universal applicability – one that's understood and accepted across all times, all cultures, all religions.

Commentators think the Jesus' answer, giving the two commandments, was probably not original. What was different, though, was the way he linked them together. LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND. And a second is like it ("like" here meaning almost "the same as"): LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.

It's easy to see why the lectionary has that reading from Matthew and also the reading from Leviticus. Just a note to say that we don't hear much from Leviticus. Those who have waded through it often think that it's legalistic and outdated. "Gnarly" is the word one person used. But in addition to the tie with Matthew, the

reading from Leviticus raises three important questions: what does it mean to be holy as God is holy; what does it mean to love as God loves; and who is my neighbor and what is my obligation toward that neighbor. And you'll note that Leviticus ties all of those together.

Let's look first at holiness. God tells Moses to say to the Israelites: YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I THE LORD YOUR GOD AM HOLY. It helps to understand that if you remember that there are two ways to look at the idea of holiness. The first is that to be holy means to be pure, to be separate from anything that might taint you. Here the idea is that you need to avoid "the other." This is a boundary setting concept. But the other, which we hear in this reading, is different. It's about our ethical obligation to transgress any boundaries that keep us from correcting wrongs. Here holiness has to do with ethics, with living in a way that moves us toward right relationships with God and with others. In this reading, we hear the writer hanging some flesh around the concept of holiness: it means to be fair, to be truthful, not to hate, not to take vengeance, not to bear grudges. It means, in short, to love your neighbor as yourself. I once saw someone demonstrate the sign of the cross by saying the vertical movement is the connection between me and God and the horizontal movement is the connection between me and others. We need both. We're hearing that in this passage.

So, then, LOVE. Someone has (teasingly, I hope) said that I preach about love all the time. That reminds me of the story told about John, the writer of the fourth gospel. The story is that when he was very old and the members of his community had to bring him out to speak with them on a stretcher, someone said, "You know, you always preach about love. Why don't you preach

about something else?” And John’s answer: there is nothing else.

Love. Since I have indeed preached a lot about this, you may remember that I have tried to emphasize that what’s being talked about is NOT romantic love, or feel-good emotional love. Instead, it’s first about a certain mind set, a recognition that we are all connected and then about the kind of action that flows from that. We’re connected, we’re all in this together, we’re responsible for one another. There’s the tie to holiness: we’re to LOVE AS GOD LOVES – everyone and everything, no exceptions. Remember Jesus saying that just as the rain falls on the just and the unjust, so it is with God’s love. We, then, are to love as God loves. In Jesus’ time, and in our times as well, the temptation was to think that love and responsibility were only toward our families, our kin, our tribe, our nation. But Jesus pushed that much further when he said that we’re also to love our enemies. Again, maybe not warm feelings, but certainly a recognition that each person is loved by God and my duty to love means not only that I will accept that person but that I will work for that person’s wellbeing. All that reminds me of the Eucharistic Prayer we say through most of the year. In the preface we say that God has MADE US A NEW PEOPLE IN JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD - and here comes the kicker – TO SHOW FORTH GOD’S GLORY IN THE WORLD. Glory – God’s essence, God’s presence, God’s way of being. Love, in other words. And we are called to embody that.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this:

We can love our kith and kin, our fellow countrymen and our friends, whether we are Christians or not, and there is no need for Jesus to teach us that. So what does it really mean to be a Christian?...Unreserved love for our enemies, for the unloving and

the unloved, love for our religious, political and personal adversaries.

That's pretty demanding and he wrote that, appropriately, in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

And finally, there's that pesky question of the neighbor, which Bonhoeffer touched on. I ran across a story of a little girl, who is 5 years old. Her name is Lucy Carlson. When Lucy heard about the national anger that followed the death of George Floyd, she told her mom that she thought it was important to get to know their neighbors. "I'm going to meet them all. If they need help, I want them to know where I live so they can come to me for help. I'm going to have them sign my paper so I know their names. But not in cursive." (That last is a sure sign that she's 5!) So, the next day, carrying an enormous piece of paper and a pouch of crayons, Lucy and her mom headed out. One by one they met the neighbors, Lucy telling them they could sign her paper with whichever crayon they wanted, even the glittery ones. As she knit the neighborhood together, Lucy learned how to make jam, got to strum a harp, got an offer for a babysitter, met a woman from China and showed off her yoga poses. (The Christian Century)

It's a great story, isn't it? But... it doesn't go far enough in the definition of neighbor. You might recall that this same gospel appears in Luke, but in Luke the lawyer pushes Jesus further by asked him, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus then tells the story of the Jewish man beaten and robbed. His fellow countrymen crossed the road to avoid him, but a hated Samaritan stopped and cared for him. That, Jesus is saying, that's who is your neighbor. Anyone in front of you who needs your help. So the neighbor surely is the person who lives near us, but it's also those who live far from us who we are able to help.

One more thought here. The commandment says that we should love the neighbor as we love ourselves. We know what we need, we know what we want. There's the challenge. To have that same sensibility toward others – to have the same concern for them as I have for myself. I was recently told a story by a friend about what I suppose you could call a thought experiment. He himself would be considered financially successful and was in a conversation with other men who were the same. The talk turned to the recent tax cut. He suggested the question: if you were the beneficiary of the 2017 tax cut, say to the tune of \$10,000, did holding on to that extra \$10,000 improve the quality of your life? Now imagine that a family of four with an income of \$50,000 had instead received that \$10,000. Would that have improved the quality of their lives? And in answering that, would you vote to keep those tax cuts in place? He didn't tell me about the subsequent conversation, but it illustrates the point about knowing our own concerns and the challenge to ascribe those same needs and concerns to others.

Maybe the place to end this is with the psalm. It, too, ties into following that ethical path that leads to holiness. The one who so lives is happy, is life-giving, is like a tree planted by streams of water.

Life-givers, showing the face of God to the world. Amen.