

Sermon Proper 25 Year A 2017
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
Psalm 1
1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8
Matthew 22:34-46
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The story is told of a morning radio show that for a time encouraged folks to call in and repeat the first words they said that morning. “If you’re the third caller, you’ll win \$106.” Morning after morning, the D. J. would say, “You’re caller number three, what did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?” The callers would say things like, “Do I smell coffee burning?” Or “Oh, no, I’m late for work!” “No, it’s raining again.” “Oh, no, it’s Monday.” This went on for some time until one morning a sleepy voice with a Bronx accent said, “You want to know my first words in the morning?” The bubbly D. J. responded, “Yes, sir! Tell us what you said!” “When I got out of bed I said, ‘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). There was a moment of confused silence. Then the radio announcer hastily cut to a commercial. (Synthesis, Proper 25, October 29, 2017, p. 4).

The listener had called in and repeated the words that those of the Jewish faith say twice each day, as they awaken and as they lie down. This is known as the Shema. Shema is the Hebrew word for “hear.” This passage comes from the sixth chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy and for faithful Jews this is the greatest commandment.

For the past six weeks or so our gospel lessons have come from the final period of controversy between Jesus and the religious authorities. This sequence as we recall was brought on by Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his cleansing of the Temple. Group after group have come to question Jesus. First it was the chief priests and elders who asked Jesus what was the authority for his actions? Then it was the Pharisees and Herodians. They were followed by a group

of Sadducees. All were trying to entrap Jesus and thus justify a charge of blasphemy against him.

Today is the last questioning confrontation by those in religious authority. Today the Pharisees make one final run at Jesus as one final test, a lawyer asks Jesus a question. Now, we must remember a wise saying, a lawyer never asks a question that they don't know the answer to. And I am not sure how this question might pose a test for Jesus. All faithful Jews knew the answer to the question. So, this lawyer as well as all the Pharisees gathered there could have mouthed the words of Jesus' response. The greatest commandment is derived from the Shema. Jesus expressed it like this, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

He went on, "This is the greatest and first commandment..." But Jesus did not stop there. And indeed this is the heart of his controversial life and ministry. Jesus had the nerve to state that one tiny commandment (out of over 600) buried in the Law was second to the great commandment. Jesus was not the first to connect the two though. Faithful Rabbis before him had as well but he would join the two irrevocably.

Jesus reached back into the Book of Leviticus, that text that if you have tried to read it can be quite tedious. Jesus reached into Chapter 19 (and in this section God is delivering commentary on the Ten Commandments between these first two verses that we began with and verse 15 where we picked back up.) This chapter outlines the Holiness Code. The Holiness Code calls us to be holy as God is holy. By this we understand that our lives are to be set apart and distinctive and this chapter is outlining what a holy life looks like.

Jesus began with the Shema and joined it with another law from Leviticus that he called the second commandment, the one that is so dear to us. Jesus said, "And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

This was Mt., Mark says, "The second is this..." Luke just continues the Shema saying "and your neighbor as yourself." Luke makes it even clearer that the love of God is the same as the love of neighbor.

All three Gospels carry this teaching. There is a related passage found in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas as well. Logion 25 reads, “Jesus said, ‘Love your brother or sister as your soul, and guard them as the apple of your eye.’” (Gospel Parallels, p. 164). These two commandments were linked in significance and practice by Jesus. Thus making them perhaps Christianity’s clearest affirming summary. This is the heart of our Christian faith, which we call the Great Commandment. While we may not say this twice a day, perhaps we should because Christians can say the Great Commandment by heart.

For Jesus and this is what separates Jesus’ ministry from the worship of God before him. We are to love God fully and faithfully and our love of our neighbor is the visible sign of loving God. Jesus was offering this as a critique of the lives of the Pharisees. They loved God at least they said as much but their actions did not support this.

In the chapter that follows today’s lesson, Jesus will make this clear. (What follows today is Mt. 23 which we will not hear due to the calendar and next Sunday being the Feast of All Saints. Explicate. The Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat and teach what he taught but they do not practice it. So Jesus said that when it came to the pronouncements of the religious authorities, they should listen to what they said, but not observe what they did because they did not practice what they preached.)

I find the most helpful way to approach or try to understand the Great Commandment, one must turn it around and begin at the end in what seems like practicing it in reverse. This approach necessarily makes the Great Commandment incredibly difficult. Beginning at the end, we must begin our practice of leading a holy life by loving ourselves. Now this can be problematic in both extremes. Many of us are our own harshest critic. In looking in the mirror we are confronted by our own foibles and shortcomings first and foremost. We have a hard time finding qualities in ourselves that might be admirable or worthy. Humility can produce this. In looking at ourselves, we fail to find much that seems worthy.

But there is danger in the other extreme. Now, we have come to know clearly that it is possible to love oneself too much. The Greek mythological story

of Narcissus was the ancient example from which we derive the term narcissism. Some can do no wrong in their own eyes. They lack the critical quality and ability of self-reflection. So, loving ourselves can pose a challenge.

So, what does loving ourselves look like? From CREDO materials, life is to be energizing not draining. We have to resist the tendency to be hypercritical of ourselves. Forgiveness begins with forgiving ourselves first. Acknowledging our faults and shortcomings which is what confession is all about, but once forgiven by God's grace and mercy, then to extend that same mercy internally and ease up on our ourselves. Forgiveness is offered by God, yet we must accept it. Then we can care for ourselves as God intends. By this we mean following a healthy lifestyle. Good nutrition, exercise, and rest are important if we are to truly care for ourselves. If we are experiencing emotional illness, then we must seek treatment rather than the self-sabotaging behavior that keeps us from getting and receiving help. This is not easy work but it is important and I think it speaks to what Torah and Jesus are encouraging.

As Christians we know better than to ask the follow-up question that the lawyer asked in Luke's gospel, "Who is my neighbor?" There Jesus responded with the Parable of the Good Samaritan where we learned that our neighbor is everyone even those we despise.

This second commandment as I said was drawn from the Law. The original context of this law from Leviticus and the Holiness Code was "to warn against holding grudges or taking vengeance against a neighbor." The Hebrew scriptures speak clearly against holding grudges. Holding grudges keeps us confined as prisoners to the past. The same goes for our desire for vengeance against our neighbor which leads to plotting schemes to be enacted in the future. The danger is that looking ahead with a vengeful heart, we will miss the present. We may miss the only day we can be sure to possess, today. Today is simply filled with opportunity for us to care for ourselves and for our neighbor. We aren't to live in regret or remorse or by jumping too far ahead and dreaming and hoping for some future day. But rather living into this day, this time, this moment, with those whom God has placed before and around us.

It turns out that if we don't love those whom God has placed around us, in this fabric of relationship and community, then we aren't really loving God. That is the brilliance of Jesus' commandment. All these practices are inextricably linked and connected. We can say the Great Commandment by heart, but Jesus' hope is that we will live the commandment, by loving and caring for ourselves first, and our neighbor second, and this will be the adequate demonstration of our love of God.