

Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
October 29, 2023 Yr A
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: Matthew 22:34-46

If you have ever taken on the worthwhile endeavor of reading the Hebrew Bible, I suspect that there was a large part of the Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy that you glossed over. Both books contain lists that have become known as the 613 commandments of God by which all law-abiding Israelites lived. These commandments include 365 “negative commandments”, sometimes described as one for every day of the year, where you are ordered not to do something, like, “Do not commit murder.” Then there are 248 “positive commandments” which describe what one is to do to faithfully follow the Torah, the teaching given to Moses.

There are certainly a few interesting ones. How about “You shall not permit a sorcerer to live?”; or “You shall not sell a captive woman?”; or how about the laws regarding the burning, hanging, strangling and stoning of people who do not keep the laws? As interesting many of them are, for most

Jewish people today, only about 40% of the 613 commandments apply.

Today, Jesus is asked to consider the 613 commandments found in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah, or *The Teaching*, and to select the cornerstone.

Jesus is asked, what is the greatest commandment in the Law of Moses? He responds with the two great commandments – to love God with all that you are and to love your neighbor as yourself. This is what we are keeping our eyes and focus on, hopefully. You could say, this is what happens in and through us when we are fully spiritually mature.

Jesus is not saying something new to the Pharisees, he is identifying what everyone already knows – he is summing it up in two short commands: *on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets*. This is what the whole teaching of the Old Testament is about, and they must still be in front and center.

But Jesus does add something by saying that the first commandment to love God is *like* the second commandment

to love our neighbor. Why is the commandment to love God *like* the commandment to love our neighbor? We are to love our God as a being of ultimate worth. The second commandment is like it, because humanity is made in the image and likeness of God, and humanity is worthy of such love.

The way God knows that we love God is by how we treat others. Whenever we demonstrate kindness, patience or gentleness, we see the Lord's love at work through us, especially when the other person has been unkind and doesn't deserve such pleasant treatment. Our relationships with others demand priority over things that won't last or won't matter in a few years.

It is our faith in the truth that God loves us that makes us able to love ourselves and therefore be grateful for the gift of ourselves. This awareness of life as a gift is what we mean by loving God. When we love ourselves, we are grateful to God, and this gratitude sets us free to love other people. When we truly love people, we value them as gifts of God.

And we need to distinguish the kind of love we are speaking of. “Eros” love is the love that we feel for one another that emanates from our own being, from our desire for one another. “Agape” love, what Jesus is speaking of, is the love that begins with God and flows through us in such a way that we can only give it forward without any expectation of reciprocity. Jesus’ teaching isn’t about how we feel about God and our neighbor, but how we act towards them. We are to love God with all our lives in the service of other lives. It shows that our love for God is number one in our lives. Love for God and love for all of those who are made in God’s image form the backbone of everything God wants for us. In the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 13:10, “Love is the fulfillment of the law”.

You have the first commandment, love for God, and you have the second, Love your neighbor, and these two are together. “The second,” Jesus says, “is like it.”

When Jesus says that the command to love our neighbor is like the command to love God, he is connecting our earthly

life with Kingdom life. He is saying, “When you love and serve and help your neighbor, it is as if you were loving and serving Me!” In Matthew 25 Jesus summarizes the two laws through active examples. He says,

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:35-40)

In times of great despair and conflict, such as those we have seen in the war in the Ukraine, the conflict in the Middle East and the recent mass shooting in Lewiston, Maine, we often

ask what can I do about these global fractures? How do I help those so far removed from me?

Well, says Jesus, I give you that opportunity with every one of your neighbors. When you love your family, when you take care of your friends, when you bless your neighbor, when you help those in need, when you seek the best for the other, you are serving and loving God. “The second is like the first,” says Jesus. Our ability to care and love globally is predicated on how well we do it locally. Given the state of the world, that should tell us something profound.

So we don’t have to pretend to be “holy” (whatever that means in this context), we don’t have to avoid those who are difficult to have relationships with, and we don’t have to spend a lot of money to find a way to serve God, these opportunities are always right in front of us.

But this command to love God and our neighbor is the doctrine of the Law, and it will always accuse us because of the many ways we will fall short of it, or the many ways we

give up on trying. That greatest of love doesn't exist far from us, however. We can always claim it in word and deed and the gift of God will be found in our trying, not perfecting. In our efforts, not in the result. This love already resides in us in perfect form, if only we would let it out. Amen.