

Sermon for Pentecost 19, Year A, Proper 25, October 23, 2011
Matthew 22:34-46

Good Morning!

I suspect, like many parents, I worry about my kids. I want them to be happy, successful, and have a strong sense of self. I want them to make a positive contribution to the world that will benefit others. And, I want them to be faithful – to live lives of faith and to be active in the Church. At this point in their lives, they are not inclined to be church-goers for any one of a number of reasons. I often think about the observation made by a Roman Catholic Nun, Katherine Dyckman, who recounted the story of talking with a couple who were fretting that their daughter was not interested in church. They were worried that she was losing her faith. And Dyckman responded, “Perhaps she is losing your faith, and finding her own.” That may well be what will happen with my sons.

But when I have an opportunity to talk with them about matters of faith, religion, and the Church, I try and jump at the opportunity. I had one such occasion when Margaret and I and our two younger sons were in New York City last month. On one of our outings, we wanted to show Andrew and Daniel the New York City Public Library – a magnificent building to visit. Margaret and Andrew had gone on ahead while Daniel and I brought up the rear. And as he and I walked together along this crowded New York City street, we started to talk about the bible. Daniel rather forthrightly announced to me that he did not believe in the bible. He said, “I don’t believe what the bible says. It does have good values like loving other people, but the rest of it I don’t believe in.” Trying to defend scripture, I launched off into a discussion of Rudolf Bultmann’s belief that the purpose of the Word when proclaimed in church was to go out among the people sitting in the pews and to create an existential crisis by challenging people to choose how they will respond. Daniel said nothing to this – I would like to think it gave him something to think about, but who knows?

Since then, I have thought about his comment that the values of the bible, specifically the call to love, have merit. We have, for example, St. Paul’s magnificent statement on love in 1 Corinthians 13. And we have his observation in Romans that we are to avoid debt except the debt of mutual

love. We have Jesus' words in John's gospel that we are to love one another as he has loved us. We have Jesus telling Nicodemus earlier in John's gospel that God so loved the world that he sent his son. The references to love go on in various other places in scripture.

But I think the passage that my son had in mind can be found in our gospel lesson this morning. Jesus is challenged by a lawyer to name the greatest commandment of them all. Jesus responds with what is known as the Summary of the Law. According to Jesus, we are to love God with all of our heart, our soul, and our mind. And we are to love our neighbor as our self. All of the Law of Moses and the writings of the Prophets hang on these two commandments. I might add that long-time Episcopalians will remember that the Summary of the Law was recited in the communion service of the 1928 BCP, and earlier versions of the BCP. And the Summary of the Law is included in the Rite 1 service of our current Prayer Book, and it is found in the Penitential Office that precedes the Rite 2 Eucharist. But the call to love our neighbor, I think, is the passage that Daniel was thinking of as we walked along the street. And I would agree with him, yes, it does reflect good values to live by.

The words that Jesus recited to the lawyer were not words that he made up on the spot. This summary of the law is found in two places in the Old Testament. The first commandment to love God is found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and represents part of the Shema, the basic and essential creed in Judaism, the sentence in which every Jewish service opens with. The second half of the Summary of the Law is found in Leviticus 19:18 – to love your neighbor as yourself. According to Jesus, the all encompassing love of God is the greatest commandment of all. The commandment to love our neighbor is grounded in the love of God. And Jesus concluded that everything in the Law of Moses rests on these two great commandments.

But there is something more that can be said about these two commandments. I have often felt that in the popular mind, love is thought of as something sentimental – a Hallmark greeting card kind of love. But the love that is expressed here by Jesus is something far more dynamic, all encompassing, and even radical. To love God, in the manner in which Jesus is speaking, is intense, focused, and absorbing. A couple of sources within our Christian tradition and in Judaism, suggest that the love of God borders on being erotic. There is a 12th century rabbinic collection of writings that sees in Deuteronomy 6:5, a call to love God with a passion far more intense

than that of a couple experiencing the pleasures of intercourse following a prolonged separation. The call to love God involves a yearning and aching for the Beloved. Everything about us desires to be with God, to enjoy God, to please God.

The second commandment to love our neighbor as oneself is equally radical. Over the years, I have heard preached a number of sermons, and have read a number of commentaries and books on this commandment suggesting that we first need to love ourselves before we can ever love another person. Now there is no question that it is a good thing to have a healthy self-regard for oneself. Psychoanalytic writings speak of the necessity of children having a healthy narcissism early in life if they are to develop normally. But this commandment stems from an awareness that transcends the individual self. Christ's teaching does not mean, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself," but rather, "Love your neighbor as yourself." What this means is that we love others not because they love us, or affirm us, or reflect us, but because they are us. In other words, we are bound to one another by God. We find ourselves in the other, and the other finds him or her self in us. From the perspective of our Christian faith, it is seeing Christ in the other person, and the other person seeing Christ in us. I remember the story told by Henri Nouwen about a visitor who came to see him. After they had talked for awhile, they became silent for quite a while. Finally the visitor looked up at Nouwen and said, "When I am in your presence, I feel as if I am in the presence of Christ himself." And Nouwen said quietly, "It is the Christ in you who recognizes the Christ in me."

That is what that second commandment is about. We see the other as us, and vice versa. We see Christ in the other, knowing that we are Christ to them. It really has nothing to do with feeling good about ourselves or loving ourselves. It is about that basic unity that exists between all human beings and the capacity to recognize the Divine in the lives of others.

I would wager that no one apart from Jesus himself, has ever lived out this Summary of the Law perfectly. But could we imagine even for a few moments what it would be like to ache and yearn for God with a passionate intensity? Could we imagine what it would be like for us to see every person we encounter as part of us – as bearers of Christ – knowing that we are offering the same to them? Can we imagine, even knowing that we will live this out imperfectly, that our intent is to try again, and again, and again, how transformative this would be in our lives? Can you imagine the effect it

would have on the people who know us, or the communities that we belong? Can you imagine what Christ Church, or the Episcopal Church, or the Christian community at large would be like if we strived to live this way to the best of our ability? How would our communities be different? How would this effect the way we manage our disagreements, or our understanding of mission, or our approach to the disciplines of prayer, and sacrament, and outreach? If we were to exercise our imaginations for a few minutes, perhaps do it repeatedly on a regular basis, picturing ourselves loving God with a deep consuming passion, and loving our neighbors as our selves, what would that be like? How might we be different? How might our perception of the world be different?

St. Paul said in Romans that love is the one thing that cannot hurt our neighbor, which is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments. Daniel was right – that is a good value – a good value to strive for and to live by.