

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 26)  
October 31, 2021  
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Deuteronomy 6:1-9  
Psalm 119:1-8  
Hebrews 9:11-14  
Mark 12:28-34

*Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at [www.trinitybend.org](http://www.trinitybend.org).*

I don't think I've ever preached on this morning's gospel before – not this particular chapter and these particular verses. It's a quirk of the church's calendar that the readings assigned to us this morning are almost always set aside in favor of All Saints' Day. That's at least part of the reason why I've never preached on this morning's gospel.

But then again, I hope I've never NOT preached on these words:

*“Which commandment is the first of all?”*

*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.”*

I hope that *the love of God and neighbor and self* creeps into just about every sermon in me.

Jesus seems to have taken these words deeply into himself – and he gave them expression in every thought he shared, every story he told, every deed he performed. Even when under duress. Especially when under duress.

These are no clues in what we just heard read here this morning, but we should know that these are Jesus' last days. He entered the city in glory, with enthusiastic crowds going out to welcome him, what we celebrate as Palm Sunday.

But the religious leaders – chief priests and scribes and elders and Pharisees and Herodians and Sadducees, they all challenged him at every turn from the time he arrived. And then, in the midst of all this – on what we count as Tuesday in Holy Week – a scribe asks Jesus:

*“Which commandment is the first of all?”*

It's not clear whether this scribe is an exception. Is he sincere or is he just another opponent trying to get Jesus? But it matters not in the least, so far as I can tell. Jesus gives the only answer he knows. Whether speaking to a potential disciple or a hostile enemy, he speaks the only truth he knows: the love of God that springs forth into the love of neighbor as oneself.

It's a marvel. I find it stunning. In the midst of conflict in the extreme, Jesus holds true to his center of love. For my part, I can barely hold it together in Costco when a stranger refuses to wear a mask. How does Jesus do that – maintain his grounding in love under such duress?

Jesus didn't make up his answer on the spot that day. He knew it beforehand. When he spoke of loving God he was quoting Deuteronomy (our first reading this morning). Every Jew would have known these words. They would have said them first thing every morning and before retiring for the night. Jesus gives an answer nobody would refute.

Sometimes we think Jesus was opposed to Jewish legalism. But that's not quite right. We should be clear that Jesus is not setting himself up as against Judaism. He's reaching deep into the depths of his Jewish roots. There is but one God. Accept no substitutes.

Jesus reminds us that this is where we start. The Bible talks about the competing gods of other nations. The Bible talks about idols. The notions may seem foreign to 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, but even now there are competing claims. Careers demand that sacrifices be made even still. But they will not "save" us in the end.

Jesus reminds us to worship none other than the God who cares about the suffering of people, the God who offers liberation and a life of freedom and dignity for all.

That reading from Deuteronomy has come to be known as the *Shema*. That name for that prayer comes from the very first word. Before all that follows there is a sing word: *shema*:

*Hear ...*

*(Hear, O Israel ...)*

*Listen!*

Jesus did that the whole of his life; he practiced what he preached. He listened, and so, he heard the word spoken at his baptism – a word that would be a foundation for all to come:

*"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Jesus spent his 40 days in the wilderness listening to the echoes of that word of God's love. And from the moment Jesus returned, he repeated them to anyone who would listen, telling them that God loves us all as a parent loves a child. Jesus spoke of that love both in word and in deed.

There are some who say that that first word, *shema*, is really the only word of command. Linguistically, it's the only imperative; the rest of the verbs that follow are in the indicative tense. The imperative – actually a present tense imperative – is the commandment to "keep on listening ..." And if we do as we're told and listen to God – carefully, deeply – then the rest will follow – automatically, inevitably – as a response to what we hear.

At yesterday's memorial for Bill Ellis, one of his daughter's, Rachel, shared an important point that fits in, I think. This is part of what she shared:

I remember a conversation I had with my dad that helped me understand his belief in God. That there is infinite love available to every single human being on this planet. It is not about deserving, or earning, or being worthy of it. It just is. Our only job in accessing that love is open our hearts to it. To allow ourselves that refuge in all the insecurities, pain, confusion, anger, failings ... There is love for each and every one of us as we live with our perceived brokenness.

*Shema!* Listen!

The Presbyterian writer and preacher Frederick Buechner says that's the wonder of it all:

The final secret, I think is this: that the words "You shall love the Lord your God" become in the end less a command than a promise. And the promise is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, we will come to love [God] at last as from the first [God] has loved us – loved us even in the wilderness, because [God] has been in the wilderness with us. [God] has been acquainted with our grief. And, loving [God], we will come at last to love each other too so that, in the end, the name taped on every door will be the name of the one we love.

"And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." <sup>i</sup>

And that, I think, is why Jesus, in this morning's gospel, irreversibly links and irrevocably binds the love of God with the love of neighbor.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has reminded us of this. More than once. More than twice. Michael Curry has reminded us a lot: "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

Michael Curry didn't invent the notion, of course. But what he does – so passionately and so persistently – is cling to these key words of Jesus. They're the key to everything else.

And Jesus, I remind you, didn't make up either part of his answer on the spot either. He didn't wake up one day and decided whether or not to start loving. Love was what welled up from his own experience of God's love for him, born at his baptism and renewed in his life of prayer, as I've said. AND it welled up from his deep listening to his own tradition:

- Love God, Jesus says, drawing from Deuteronomy.
- Love your neighbor as yourself, he adds, hearkening back to Leviticus.

The scribe listens to Jesus and agrees. "This is much more important," he says, "than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." They see things eye to eye. Love is greater than religious duty.

Knowing himself to be loved and knowing the tradition that insists that the love of God is for all God's children, Jesus disallows the divide between love of God and love of neighbor. There can be no separation between the two. "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

St. Catherine of Siena, a 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, put it this way:

The reason God's servants love creatures so much is that they see how much Christ loves them, and it is one of the properties of love to love what is loved by the person we love.<sup>ii</sup>

That comes out a bit convoluted, I admit, but it makes the point: the only love of neighbor that can sustain us is grounded in seeing ourselves as loved in the first place. Knowing ourselves to be loved inspires us to love others ... to love all who are loved by the God of love.

I said at the start that I don't think I've ever preached on this morning's readings before. But I hope I never fail to preach these words of love – the love of God and neighbor and ourselves, too – so long as I have the privilege of standing here before you.

And may we all preach – in word and in deed – the same. When it's easy, yes. And especially when it's not.

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<sup>i</sup> Frederick Buechner, "Love," in *A Room Called Remember* (Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco, 1984), p. 45.

<sup>ii</sup> Cited in *Synthesis* (Proper 26 – Year B, October 30, 1994), p. 2.