

Why We Are Here

Matthew 22:34-46

October 23, 2011

I.

I wish there was more time. We have two significant readings today. The Old Testament lesson described the death of Moses. The Gospel proclaims Jesus' call to love God and our neighbors.

This sermon also will be a little shorter anyway because after I finish I would like to invite Joe Floyd and Stan Calmes, our 2012 stewardship chairs, to come forward and briefly speak with us.

But first, the readings. And being Episcopalians we might take the middle road and want to hear about both of them. To some extent I will do that as I talk a little about Moses, and then focus on the Gospel.

Moses was the greatest of the Hebrew prophets. While God spoke with the others in dreams and visions, he spoke with Moses face to face. And after Moses called down supernatural plagues upon the Egyptian pharaoh, he delivered all the Hebrew people from captivity, parted the Red Sea, and took them through the wilderness to the promised land that would become Israel.

Moses also spent forty days on Mt. Sinai talking to God and receiving the Ten Commandments and other laws that would govern the Jewish people from that time to the present day (Ex. 24:18).

And when Moses came down from the mountain, and found that the people were worshipping a golden calf, as we heard two weeks ago, he shattered the stone tablets in anger and went back up the mountain to spend another forty days with God (Ex. 34:28).

This might explain why traditional scholarship holds that Moses wrote most of the first five books of the Bible. He had a lot of face time with God.

The books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy describe all revelation from the beginning of creation up to the time the Hebrews crossed the Jordan River into Canaan. And God certainly could have imparted all that information to Moses during the time they spent together, perhaps instantaneously.

And the last verses in today's reading, obviously a part Moses did not write, shows that God uniquely empowered Moses. It says, "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform." So, in the hierarchy of giants in Hebrew history, Moses was at the top.

II.

And now, let's turn to the Gospel. It seems tailor-made for a sermon, doesn't it? We are told to love God and our neighbors. Who would argue with that? We have heard that basic principle for years. On the surface it appears so obvious that a sermon almost could deliver itself.

And given the many uncertainties and complexities of religion and theology, don't we often look for some easy answers; some central principles at the heart of it all?

Love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love our neighbors as ourselves. While these commandments are the solution to our problems and the guiding principles of our Christian faith, they are not always easy to do. When we look at the world, at society, and even at the church, we find these teachings absent from many parts of contemporary life.

These two commandments are referred to as the Great Commandments or the Summary of the Law. They encompass the Ten Commandments, and stand alone as statements of what our Lord expects from us. There is nothing in our faith that exists apart from, or is unaffected by, the obligation to love God and our neighbor.

But what did Jesus really mean when he gave these instructions to humanity? Can love be commanded? Can love be dialed up on demand? Does it come in a flash bang moment or develop over time? How does this kind of love work?

I'm reminded of the story of a fellow who was walking past a bookstore and noticed a book in the window with the title "Learning to Love." He went inside to inquire, and found that it actually was the twelfth volume of an encyclopedia that covered topics from "Learning" to "Love."

The fellow naturally was disappointed in a way that parallels what sometimes happens in church. Some people come hoping to learn to love, and instead find an encyclopedia on theology.

But we don't need much theology to love God and our neighbors. It is more personal. It comes through prayer, worship, faith, and allowing God to help us express it in our entire being. We can't just think ourselves into it. And we can't scrunch up our eyes, clench our fists, grit our teeth, and force love to come out of us.

And so it comes from our hearts, not our heads. Nothing can be held in reserve. There are no half measures, no cutting corners, and no doing it tomorrow. It is not about just trusting God, or only worshipping God, or merely being obedient to God, but rather loving God with all we have and all we are. And in doing that we just naturally will do all those other things.

This is reflected in the theme of our stewardship campaign. The banner over the double doors behind you says, "Our Response to God's Blessings." Our response is part of the first Great Commandment. We respond to God in love by sharing what we have with him. Loving God means placing him first. And first means first. We give to God what is right, not what is left.

So we see that loving God not only is a matter of feeling, but also of action, doing, commitment, and how we live in the world. As we love God, then God becomes an integral part of how we think, act, decide things, and present ourselves to others.

And we love our neighbor in the same way. But please note that Jesus did not say to love our neighbor *instead* of ourselves or *more than* ourselves, but rather *as* ourselves. This means we are called to be just as willing to do something for someone else as we are to do it for ourselves.

That's the Golden Rule of the Gospels. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Mt. 7:12, Lk. 6:31). The needs of others are as important as our own, and when we help others we can know a more complete expression of ourselves.

III.

That all sounds good in theory, doesn't it? But it's also very difficult to do all the time in practice. Our hearts are not transformed all at once. We just don't just not love God and our neighbor with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength in one instant, and then suddenly start loving them in that way in the next instant.

But the church can help, and I see this church doing that. It is one of the strengths of St. Thomas. I believe our ability to live into these two Great Commandments is linked to the collegiality and fellowship we share here in our church.

And as we think back on the year, we might remember individual acts of kindness that we have offered to others, or have received from others, and we might recall deeply spiritual

moments where in the silence of prayer we felt the Holy Spirit move within us. These moments can grow from the community of faith we share here at St. Thomas.

I know we try to do what Jesus told us to do. And when we do it we see that it is good and our hearts are moved to do even more. Such is the nature of love. The more we give, the more we seem to get back. The more we honor God and each other, the more we seem to be blessed.

Even so, today's reading is like things Jesus said so many other times in the Gospels. It is not optional. There is not a choice. They are the Great Commandments, not the great suggestions.

Once again we have teachings that cannot be fulfilled in our own strength, but rather call upon our faith. That's one of the reasons St. Thomas is here. As individuals we probably experience times when these commandments are difficult to follow. As part of the church, however, and as part of the Body of Christ, we find it is easier.

IV.

And even though I have been standing here and explaining why we should love God and our neighbor, I believe you already are on the right side of those commandments. And if you ever think you're not, please know that you can find strength and support right here from others who love you anyway.

And so I pray that as we all go forward into the future, our common life can lead us to an even deeper sense of spirituality as we worship God, care for each other, and minister to the community. We are in this together, and I pray that our church can continue to be a place where these two great commandments govern all we do in our lives. *Amen.*