

The Greatest Commandment

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

October 25, 2020

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

Psalm 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I like to tell the story about a parishioner who came to me a few years ago to tell me about his 12 year old son. This parishioner loved his son but, like a good father, realized that 12 year olds need boundaries and rules set for them. He described to me what happened when his son was invited to a birthday party.

You know what it's like when you are 12 years old. You want to go out and have fun with your friends while the adults remain at home. You are learning to be independent and that curve will increase as the years roll on. Anyway, what about the birthday party? It turns out that two weeks earlier there had been another party at this house where a bottle of vodka was being passed around. As a result, some of the children had gotten drunk. The father had only found out after he received a tip-off.

The father got on the phone right away and spoke to the father whose son was having the birthday. The two exchanged pleasantries and then my parishioner asked the other father, "Are you planning to be there to supervise the children? And if you see any children drinking alcohol, will you step in and take the bottle?" To the first question, the reply was "yes"; to the second, the reply was "no." Scarcely able to believe what he was hearing, the father asked again, "So, if a child is drinking alcohol, you won't do anything about it?" "That's right," came the reply.

The father hung up the phone. The next thing he did was to tell his son that he would not be going to the birthday party. Naturally, the son was very angry. Why shouldn't he be allowed to be with all his friends? There's something else I didn't mention: the father also knew that among those who were drunk two weeks ago, his son was one of them. Anyway, the father stood his ground and the son didn't go to the party. The son was angry with the father for some time afterwards, which was painful for the father because he loved his son. But his love as a father included a responsibility to act in his son's best interests. When his son was older, he could make his choices. While he was immature, his father made the decisions.

I told this story because our first reading today, from the book of Leviticus, is God telling Moses to tell the Israelites the things they shouldn't be doing. In this reading it is God the Father who has a care for his children: the children of Israel. "Children" is a good word, because, typically, they want their own way and resent being told otherwise. It's when they say, "we don't need you" or "we have another god we want to worship," that things go awry.

So God gives them the commandments, which are rules for leading a good and righteous life. By "righteous" I mean a life lived in a "right" relationship with God. When we read the commandments - at least, the ten commandments - there is little we can disagree with, unless you happen to be a cynic or a satanist. Most of the commandments in the book of Leviticus are about relationships: between husbands and wives, lenders and borrowers, the ownership of property, the treatment of foreigners. Jesus obviously studied the commandments because when he is asked which one is the greatest, he quotes from Leviticus, saying: "You shall love

the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

When I typed this passage on my computer, the grammar checker underlined the word “your.” “You shall love the Lord *your* God.” Whether or not this is good grammar, it is certainly good theology. God belongs to *you* - God serves *you*, cares for *you*, watches over *you* and loves *you*. There are two types of people in the world who don’t believe this: atheists, and those who think they don’t deserve God’s love. To the second category I say, “You are right! You don’t deserve God’s love, yet God loves you nevertheless, so open your eyes to him, and trust him as a child trusts its father.”

Jesus homes in on the two commandments which are the most important. Both contain the word “love”. This is a verb, which at school I was told is a “doing” word. Sometimes when we think of the word “love”, we think of affection or of an inner warmth towards someone. But I think Jesus wants us to think of “love” as a “doing” word. How do you love God? What are you doing about it? How do you love your neighbor? What are you doing about it?

Loving God is the first, and the greatest commandment. How do we do this? How do we love God? When I think of what it’s like to be in love, it occurs to me that if I love someone, I want to know everything I can about them. That is the key to loving God. To know him is to love him. God speaks to us through the scripture. We hear him, we hope, through the words of the preacher. We hear him in the silences when we pray. We receive him in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. God can be in our hearts and minds and bodies, as food for the soul, nourishment for the heart and light for the mind. To know God brings you alive more than anything else.

To be alive means to be in love. When you love God, you see the wonder and beauty of the world, as God does, while at the same time you feel the world’s pain and sorrow. So loving God is not to sit high upon a cloud, but to be involved with God’s world, and this is where the second commandment is like the first. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Those last two words are the tricky ones: “as yourself.” How is your self-loving coming along? It always puts me in mind of the saying of Oscar Wilde: “To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.” But if we have only a small love for ourselves, it will be harder for us to love our neighbor.”

Perhaps now I understand why God loves me so much: he is making up for the lack of love for myself! I don’t mean that preening, self-regarding kind of love, where you strut about thinking you are the greatest thing since sliced bread, and everyone else a poor imitation. I mean having a genuine love for one of God’s miraculous creations: that’s you and me. We are all made in the image and love of God and yet we are all so marvelously different.

Love is flowing down from heaven and pouring into our lives, whether we realize it or not. It is the love of the Father for his children. All the time God is looking to turn our hearts towards him and then to turn them inside out, because love must flow through us in order to reach where it is needed. Love must flow through us in our words and in our deeds, whether it is say a kind word to someone who is down, or sharing what you have with another who needs it, or

listening and responding to someone's call for help. And the more we give love, the more we receive love, for God is a generous lover of humankind.

So don't hold back, or think love is something you lock up in your heart. Be generous, as God is generous. We don't keep love as a possession but pass it on, so the chain of mercy and healing is passed from one individual to another. This is the way we read the commandments: not as a dusty legal straitjacket, but as God's advice to his children, who will pass his love on to the world. And the world, my friends, has need of God's love, which is passed on by us. Make your love a "doing" word. Love God. Love neighbor. Heal the world.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Father David Beresford