



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, October 25, 2020

Scripture Passages: Deuteronomy 34:1-12 & Matthew 22: 34-46

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

Well, here we are, strangely, in the week of the Passion in our Gospel reading today – just so you know where we are in Jesus’ life. It’s a tense time in these, his first days in Jerusalem.

So our passage is part of a longer section in Matthew’s Gospel called the Temple Disputes. They start back in the previous chapter of Matthew with Jesus cleansing the Temple precincts of money changers and animal sacrifice sellers - and these disputes include our verses. And in these arguments, it seems that things between the religious authorities and Jesus are coming to a head – maybe even intentionally on Jesus’ part because he doesn’t seem to be in a conciliatory mood.

For his part, he tells three challenging – maybe even incendiary - parables to get their attention and they ask him three increasingly difficult questions culminating in our question. They’re all designed to be “gotcha” questions designed to catch Jesus out – to discredit his teaching – and to undermine his authority. Any would-be leader will recognize this technique – it is as old as the hills and as relevant as can be. And of course, being Jesus, he bats those questions away one by one.

And the question we have today is asked by a lawyer. If you just thought to yourself, “uh oh, that can’t be good.” You’ve had exactly the response Matthew wants you to. It seems lawyers had a rep then as now for clever, difficult questions. But Jesus gives a short and simple response to the question of "What is the greatest commandment?" by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

Now, his listeners would have clocked that Jesus was beating the lawyer at his own game – because answering like that in and of itself clever.

The fact that Jesus attaches "Love your neighbour as you love yourself" to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" is a bit of a sleight of hand because he's actually giving two "greatest" commandments to the religious authorities.

But there's more. I love that when Jesus gives the most important law that it's not about anything well, legal.

Did you know that there are 613 commandments in the Jewish law? 613 and Jesus chooses just two as emblematic of all the rest.

And very significantly, they are about relationship.

And then Jesus goes further when he says: on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:40).

Now, we need to understand how important his teaching was. This linking of the love of God with the love of our neighbour and ourselves as the "Greatest," commandments in fact relegated all the other laws about purity, cleanliness, rituals, sacrifices, etc, etc. to things that are secondary.

That's important for two reasons. First, by doing that, he cut the privileged status out from under the feet of the religious leaders whose position depended on these secondary laws. That's serious. And Yikes, no wonder they saw Jesus as a threat to the status quo. And no wonder they came for him.

And secondly, he'd just raised the bar for his followers. He asked them for some pretty revolutionary behaviour – behaviour that is not natural to us. Behaviour that demands a great deal because Jesus is saying that if we do not love our neighbour, as ourselves, then we cannot possibly claim to love God. And also, it's hard to love your neighbour unless you love yourself.

Let me say that again: if we don't love ourselves, it's really hard to love our neighbour. And if we do not love our neighbour like we love ourselves, we can't possibly claim to love God.

That is some very important theology there.

It's a lot to unpack. Let's just sit with that for a bit. And let me just offer this as food for thought: if you find yourself criticizing, or worse, persecuting your neighbour, maybe ask yourself why? Is it just possible that it is something in yourself that you don't like and are seeing that in your neighbour? Just a thought – a thought that might lead to different behaviour if we took it seriously.

Remember again, the connection Jesus makes between loving our neighbour and loving God – it's pretty close. That's enough for a lifetime of reflection. No wonder Jesus says all the law and prophets hang off these two commandments.

And just so we're real clear here, the "love" that Jesus calls for here is not emotion; it's not liking someone, it's not even getting along with someone or desiring, or having the warm fuzzies about someone.

The love that Jesus is talking about here is something different – it's quality is trust - loyalty. It's about enduring devotion; it's the kind of love that sustains community, and most of all, it's a digging-deep-after-conflict-and-staying-in-relationship kind of love.

There is absolutely nothing saccharine about this love. It's tough. It has a tensile strength. It's stringy and tenacious. It demands the very best from us and the most selfless from us. And it's very, very hard to live out. We mostly can't do it to be honest. And we certainly can't do it on our own. Not unless we have the help of the Holy Spirit to set aside me, myself and I and to keep making the choice to sacrifice ourselves for the other. We need the help of our Christian community to support us in that sacrificial love.

But I'll tell you this. Whenever we have been able to love like this, sacrificing a lot - up to the point of pain - for the sake of our siblings, we have been at our best as a church and we have lived up to the name Christian.

So. A lot to think about this week as we make our journey from Sunday to Monday – working out how we live as those who love ourselves, our neighbours and God.

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