



SAINT LUKE'S

THE 21ST AFTER PENTECOST
YEAR A

LEVITICUS 19:1-2, 15-18

PSALM 1

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-8

MATTHEW 22:34-46

A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM OGBURN
OCTOBER 29, 2017

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

In this part of Matthew's Gospel, the Sadducees and Pharisees have been joining forces to try to trick Jesus with theological questions to try to get him to say something that contradicts Jewish law. Sadducees and Pharisees are radically different in their beliefs ~ and their working together would be as surprising as, say, the Tea Party and Socialists teaming up together! Both the Pharisees and Sadducees see Jesus as a threat and they keep waiting for him to misspeak in order to discredit him. In today's Gospel, a lawyer among the Pharisees asks Jesus what is the greatest of the laws. By this time, Jewish theologians had determined there were 613 laws or commandments in the Torah: 365 things one shall not do; and 248 things that one shall do. This lawyer is asking Jesus, of all the 613 laws, which one is the greatest. And Jesus satisfies him with a part of the Shema, which everyone knew well, as it was recited multiples times a day by most everyone. Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." But then Jesus adds to the greatest commandment, quoting Leviticus, saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the prophets."

Jesus was well-versed in the Scriptures. In his summary of the law, he categorizes all the laws by those which pertain to one's relationship to God and laws that pertain to one's relationship to other people. Jesus is telling us that above all, including the law, is our love of God and each other. To do this means reorienting our lives and our priorities. To love God with all our heart, soul, and mind means that we put God first; it means that we seek to do God's will, walk in God's ways, and to live in to God's truth. It is seeking

to live a life of holiness. Our lesson from Leviticus says, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” God calls us to holy living because how we live matters to God. God calls us into relationship ~ and that relationship is holy. I don’t mean sanctimonious piety but rather faithful, God-oriented lives, that nurtures us and help us grow in that relationship to which God calls us.

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” Jesus adds. G. K Chesterton once wrote, “The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.” In other parts of the Gospels, Jesus tells parables to help explain who our neighbor is. And Jesus makes it clear that everyone is our neighbor: from the most contemptible to the loveliest. ‘Love your neighbor’ may sound cliché to us, but isn’t it just one of the hardest things to do? Here in New York City, we have 8 million of them! “Love God and love your neighbor’ is something we have to be reminded to do again and again. It’s hard work. It’s hard when many of those around us don’t share our same values... when they don’t prioritize loving God and loving neighbor. When our neighbors are only looking out for themselves it makes us more vulnerable. But that doesn’t let us off the hook. We are still called to holiness of life by God ~ and God calls us to look after other people, even when they don’t offer the same care and love in return. It’s behaviour that could totally transform this world if we only trusted God and each other enough to see it through.

I’ve often wondered about the clause “as yourself.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In the age of the selfie, I think we have rather mastered navel-gazing, but do we love ourself because of our egos ~ or do we love ourselves

because God loves us? If our self-worth is centered in our own ability to be successful and amazing, we will surely disappoint ourselves and others at some point in life. But what if our self-worth were couched in God's love for us? As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, "If God loves you, how dare you not love yourself?!" We have intrinsic value to God just because God loves us. And when we begin living like we believe God loves us, then we begin living in holiness.

On Tuesday 31st October, it will have been 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Church door in Wittenberg, sparking the continental reformation. In many ways, the Reformation was a call to holy living. It was a call to reorder our lives as the Body of Christ in ways that faithfully honor God and each other. Yet, it also helped us put things in theological perspective. We don't follow God's commands so that God will love us. Rather, we follow God's commands because God already loves. God's grace and mercy, promised and extended to us through Jesus' perfect faith is God's holy gift to us. There is nothing we can do to earn God's love or to save ourselves. God's love for us is so strong that God would not abandon us to our own devices. And in giving us Jesus, God frees us. So the holiness of life we now live in Christ, is a response to God's gift. Living a holy life of loving God and each other is not to earn God's love, but rather it is a way we show our gratitude.

The holiness of life to which we are called is an ordering our priorities around putting God first and loving God with all of our being - and loving each other because how we treat each other matters to God. One could say that

our relationship with God is vertical and our relationship with each other is horizontal. And at the nexus of those two points is Jesus himself. If those lines didn't cross, nothing much would matter. But they do cross... and it all matters. It means making choices that honor God and that respect other people. It means our stewardship of the earth's resources matters. It means that the way we treat immigrants matters. It means the way we engage in politics matters. It means the way we treat each other right here at St. Luke in the Fields matters. How we live matters. Jesus is the nexus point. His incarnation, life, death, and resurrection is what makes it all come together and matter. As we seek to live and grow into the holy life that God has called us to in Jesus Christ, let us pray that we may have the grace, humility, and courage to love God and God's creation with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind:

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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