

Sermon for Proper 25A
Sunday, October 29, 2023
“Love thy neighbor”

Texts: Matthew 22:37-40; Leviticus 19:18

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Shema Israel Adonai elohaynu. Adonai echad. V’ahavta et Adonai elohaycha b’kol l’vavcha, u v’chol nafshacha, u v’chol me’odecha.” Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God. The Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your very being. Any follower of Jewish faith and tradition for the last 3,500 years would recognize those words from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 that begin many prayers. It is at the core of the three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—to this very day.

In today’s Gospel reading, the Sadducees and Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus by testing his knowledge of the Scriptures and get him to make a statement of blasphemy, or force him to commit treason against the government. Then, they would have something to accuse him of and arrest him. He had just foiled their efforts by stating that they owed the emperor that which belongs to the emperor and to God that which belongs to God. They had confronted him by asking if a woman who, while on earth, had sequentially married seven different brothers as each one died (which was expected by Jewish law), whose wife would she be in heaven. Jesus told them that it just didn’t matter. You know when folks are out to get you, they will try every angle they can to trap you, won’t they? Now we find a lawyer asking Jesus, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” And his answer was ‘The Great Schema from Deuteronomy: “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 Jesus reinforced his statement with a quote from Leviticus 19:18: “A second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” All of Holy Scripture essentially boils down to these two commandments; the stories that we hear from the Bible teach us how to follow these commandments and what might happen if we don’t. We repeat those very words of Jesus at the beginning of the mass every week in what we call the Summary of the Law. We must love God with every fiber of our being and we must love our neighbor as ourself.

In the past few weeks, these commandments have challenged the faith of Jews, Muslims, and Christians to the core with the situation going on in Gaza. I know it is at the forefront of our minds right now. If only everyone could remember: love thy neighbor.

Palestinians today who are not Israeli citizens do not get to vote or run for the government of Israel, and even those living in Israel who are citizens and can vote face restrictions and barriers in their ability to participate in the government. Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank are considered to be represented by the Palestinian

Authority, but they do not get to vote or have a say in the Israeli government that ultimately controls these regions. Jesus had to deal with many of the same struggles that Palestinians face today. In his infancy, the Judean king, Herod, ordered the massacre of innocent children, and the Holy Family had to flee to Egypt for safety. Jesus lived in a country where he was forced to live under Roman authority and follow Roman laws. Judeans were not Roman citizens and, thus, were not permitted to participate in Roman civil government decisions. Judeans had a king, but his power was still under the jurisdiction of the Roman governor.

Despite all this, Jesus loved his neighbor just the same. He had to put up with the Pharisees baiting him, but he still loved them. He had to endure Roman soldiers, governors, and the other agents of the empire, but he loved them just the same. Even when the religious leaders finally found an opportunity to accuse Jesus of a crime, convinced the Roman authority to sentence him to death, and watched him be crucified, Jesus still loved all of them and forgave them, for they knew not what they did. We are supposed to do likewise and love our neighbor.

We are at a critical time when all of us around the world and in this country need to keep this at the forefront of our hearts and minds. We need to control our anger, restrain our passions, agree to disagree. We will need to advocate and fight for respect and dignity of *every* human being, no matter how different they may seem. We need to empathize around the world with those who are struggling against their own governments for their rights. We must pray for people who live in places at war with each other: Palestinians, Israelis, Ukrainians, Russians, and people in other places who aren't making the news these days. We must pray for victims of senseless violence, like those affected by the shooting in Lewiston, Maine this week. At the end of the day, we must never stop loving our neighbor: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Why? Because God said so.

At this tense time in our world, more than ever, we need to pray and heed the words of the collect for today: Almighty and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and love; and, that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.