

Introduction

Jesus’ summary of the law in today’s gospel echoes our first reading from Leviticus. We are called not only to love God with heart, soul, and mind, but also to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is out of such deep care that Paul shares the gospel with the Thessalonian community. In the confession of sins, we acknowledge that we have not loved God, neighbor and self; yet we gather to hear the word of forgiveness and to be strengthened by word and meal to be signs of God’s love and mercy in the world.

Prayer of the Day

O Lord God, you are the holy lawgiver, you are the salvation of your people. By your Spirit renew us in your covenant of love, and train us to care tenderly for all our neighbors, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

The holiness code in Leviticus urges people to be holy because God is holy. Holiness is lived out in partiality for and consideration of the poor and the weak. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. God’s people exercise justice and love in their dealings with one another.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Paul uses maternal imagery to depict the caring and nurturing relationship he shares with the Thessalonian Christians. When he first came to their city it was not to benefit himself but to share the gospel with them, which was his responsibility as an apostle of Christ.

Matthew 22:34-46

Put on the spot by the Pharisees, Jesus displays wisdom by summarizing the law of God in just two commandments and by demonstrating the Messiah must be more than the son of David.

Sermon: Jesus is Really about Relationships!

Hymn of the Day: Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love, ELW 708

Theological Insights:

- How we are to act and how we are to treat others is at the heart of today’s periscopes. As Christians we are called to a higher standard. However, we are not to be haughty or judgmental in our hearts or our actions. We are called to strive for a greater love and a higher level of compassion.

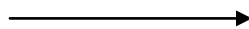
For those who have never heard:

- God does not give us rules or commandments to take all of the fun out of life. When we love our God with all we have, we live in the knowledge that God always has our best interest at heart and will never forsake us.

What’s in it for us?

- There is great peace in completely putting your heart in God’s hands. If we, daily, set out to love others as God has asked us to, petty differences fall by the wayside and the joy of giving is endless.

Image for projection:



Sermon:

The Pharisees are at it again! They think they will put Jesus in the hot seat with their question “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” The question sounds legitimate, but Matthew gives us the inside scoop in this gospel . . . there is a conspiracy among the Pharisees to trap Jesus - again! Now if the law in Jesus’ day were limited to the 10 commandments, the question would appear to be a very easy question. But the Torah, the Word of God

in the Jewish tradition, included 613 moral, ceremonial and dietary laws. The Pharisees were good people but they missed the point! The Pharisees believed that if persons obeyed all of their laws, they would be closer to God. The core of their problem, however, is that they are so engrossed in following the laws that the laws become their focus, not their relationship with God.

Jesus knew their thinking and his answer stops them in their tracks. Jesus splices 2 passages together from Deuteronomy and Leviticus and answers, "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." Jesus' answer is brilliant as it sums up all of the commandments and points to the all of who we really are.

The "greatest" commandment is not one command but two! It is our marching orders! Love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated. Loving God is definitely first and foremost, but loving our neighbor is a part of it and is tied into the first. These are easy commandments to speak, but they take more than a lifetime for any of us to be able to put them into practice. Jesus' answer sounds simple, but relationships are far from simple. And Jesus is all about relationships! So what does this command to love God and our neighbor really mean?

First - God's love for each of us is total and unconditional! God's love for us is so great that through Christ, he gives us the gift of forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life. It is all gift . . . it is all grace - God's unconditional love given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Grace - the wonderful gift of God's love. We are never worthy to receive this gift, yet God gives his love to us freely and just as we are. It is what we joyfully celebrate every Sunday as we come forward to receive Holy Communion.

Second - God's greatest desire is for us to love him back . . . to love God with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind. We cannot love God as an abstraction - as someone who is distant and apart from us. We cannot love God as a moral principle. We can never reduce God to a commandment or a rule for living. To do that strips away God's divine personhood. God chose to relate to us through Jesus, a human person. And God is all about relationships.

It sounds easy. . . but all of us struggle with relationships each and every day. We love our children, our spouses, our family or friends . . . and we also know how much work and effort it takes to sustain that love. Even the best relationships include struggle and we will often struggle with those we love, including God. It is not always easy to maintain good relationships . . . but God is all about relationships!

The Bible is also a gift God gives us. The Bible, God's Word, is not a rule book, but a love letter. Scripture is not a bunch of dos and don'ts, and if we think it is - we, like the Pharisees, are missing the point. Scripture is God's way of helping us develop a loving relationship with Him and then reaching out to our neighbors in loving ways.

Third . . . Christ calls us to have compassion for and to love our neighbor. And our neighbor is not just the person next door, but our neighbor is anyone on this planet. God commands us to love our neighbor. And when we love others we become vulnerable, which means we open ourselves to be hurt. But we take that risk because loving God and loving others is real and powerful - it is how we can fully experience the gospel. We can talk about it - or we can soar into His service. When we really have compassion for people, really love people, we hate the fact that they're being treated unjustly, we loathe the fact that they're being treated unfairly and we must do something, we must bear witness.

Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard wrote the following story that illustrates this point:

A wild goose was brought down by a hunter's lucky shot one day. But only his one wing was wounded, and he finally landed in a barnyard. The domestic ducks, geese, and chickens were quite startled by this sudden visitor from outer space, but they soon sidled up to him and asked him to describe what it was like to fly.

He extolled the glories of flight, remarking how thrilling it was to soar out in the wild blue yonder. "Why, this barn down here looks like it's only an inch high," he said, "and you are all but specks seen from such a distance." And the domestic fowl were quite impressed by his little speech and some time later asked him again to describe the glories of flight. And it got to be quite a weekly occasion, while the goose's wing was healing, for him to get up in front of the others and talk. They even provided a little box to stand on so they could see him better.

But do you know what happened? While the domestic fowl very much enjoyed hearing about the glories of flight, they never tried to fly themselves. And the wild goose, well, even though his wing healed, he just continued to talk about flying - but never flew again.

God wants us to fly! God invites us to grow in our relationship with Him through prayer and scripture and grow towards loving God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. To love God as he commands us to love him costs us everything! God wants all of us! God invites us to place ourselves in God's hands where he promises we will find great peace and hope.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus turns the tables on the questioning Pharisees. Jesus makes it quite clear that he is the one upon whom our hope depends. Our hope depends on God's cross work. Our hope in Christ is tied to the work we do in his name. With every splash of baptismal water, we celebrate God's rule in our hearts. Jesus asks the Pharisees, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Did the Pharisees realize that they were looking at their Messiah? Would we know Jesus if we saw him?

Amen.