

Sermon: October 23, 2011 Proper 25

1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8; Psalm 91: 1-6; Matthew 22: 34-46

According to Jewish tradition, Torah contained a total of 613 distinct commands, but there is one primary commandment which stands above and unifies all law in the Torah. Deuteronomy 6: 4 and following:

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the God alone!

Therefore you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates...”

Known as The *Shema*, this passage contains the basic principle of the whole Mosaic Law, the keynote of the *Book of Deuteronomy*. It is, in short, the central organizing principle of Hebrew ethics.

Jesus' method of response to Pharisees

What did Jesus do with this teaching, upon being pummeled and taunted by the elite Jewish establishment in his day? He brought forth this deep river of spiritual formation which is embedded in the hearts and minds of his fellow Jews and uses this teaching to demonstrate that his spiritual teaching cohered with the whole of Mosaic tradition.

He also relied upon passages from the *Book of Leviticus* in his response to the Pharisees who asked him, as a test, which commandment in the Law is greatest.

He tied two commandments together, i.e., The *Shema* and Leviticus 19. 18 to answer his inquisitors' question. We repeat these two passages of scripture in the Rite I liturgy of The Holy Eucharist. It is a pity, in my opinion, that Rite II omits this altogether, for it succinctly states and reminds us every time we celebrate the Eucharist of the overarching command about the ways we are to live our lives. It was no one less than Jesus who formulated this combination of law for all generations to embrace. Page 324 in *the Book of Common Prayer*:

Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hand all the Law and the Prophets.

Unambiguous. Direct. To the point. Our ethical creed. There is nothing else like it. When we are asked what exactly is it that followers of Christ adhere to? What is the core principle ethical banner under which Christians live their lives? The answer is right there, on page 324. It informs absolutely everything else there is about our faith, and therefore, our ethical lives.

In our day

Love for God and our neighbor. What would the world look like if we took this really to heart? Really seriously? Our world would indeed be more just and less violent. The rule of law may, even as ambiguously defined as it often is, is one way a society becomes more just, bit-by-bit sometimes, but the rule of law does lean progressively toward what our Lord meant when he reminded his inquirers about love of God and

neighbor. Think of the King of Siam in the old favorite movie musical, “*The King and I*,” as the lovely governess, Anna, played by Deborah Kerr, slowly and patiently taught the King, played by Yul Brynner, to take a kinder, gentler way with his people in addition to teaching him western cultural ways.

Look at this week’s news of the demise of Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi. The news of his death reverberated across the Middle East and across the globe. As a military dictator without regard for any type of rule of law, his 42 years of control defied any appropriation of the type of love of God and neighbor about which Jesus teaches.

We may have a gnarled, convoluted and conflicted Congress, a frustrated and frustrating executive branch and contend with controversial dimensions of the judiciary, but in comparison to the regimes like Quaddafi, we might ought to get on our knees and give thanks for a democratic form of government which gives us choices and opportunities unlike any other.

It is up to us to make our government better to serve the needs of *all* our people. The way I read what Jesus had to say, he would not care about party—he would care about policy—and the just application of law throughout society.

Jesus’ world

Jesus grew up in a small country, governed by a foreign power, within the bosom of the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He lived with the Law of Moses as supreme, and sometimes in conflict with Roman law, but law itself was deemed important and necessary for human order and care. In that way we are not so different, even though we live in a multi-national, complex post-modern society. Law matters to us in ways not imaginable to the people of the first century but it matters.

Intellectual property law, for example, would blow their minds! What about the ethics of bio-technology and broader reaches of science? We could cite example after example of contemporary avenues of research and exploration globally and beyond our single planet which Jesus' world and time on earth could never envision. Still, we have a connection with Jesus and first century Palestine through the thread of Mosaic Law which he inherited from antiquity. The Ten Commandments have survived the test of time.

Moving Forward

Jesus was never one to be bogged down with legalisms. In fact, he demonstrated over and over again that common sense and love trumped legalisms. Curing the withered hand on the Sabbath is my favorite example of his spiritual common sense. The Summary of the Law, as Jesus organized it and taught, gives us the foundation to make good, moral, loving decisions in every aspect of our lives. It serves to promote ethical stewardship of all that we have—for ourselves and for others.

As we continue to wander in the wilderness of economic uncertainty in our day, we can rest assured that keeping the Summary of the Law will benefit everyone in every way. We can love God and our neighbor by supporting that which we value—our worship experiences, our house of worship, our teaching, of young and old, our pastoral care of ourselves and others and our arms of outreach to the wider world. In short, our religious community at work, with love of God and neighbor always in play.

Take heart with God's commandments--remember-- love really does make the world go round. Amen.

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