

The Commandments and God's love

Sermon preached at Evensong at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, March 11, 2018

Exodus 20:1-17; Mark 12:28-34

Exodus 20:1-17 (NIV): *And God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

Mark 12:28-34 *And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our 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 mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.*

This is a special Evensong crafted for the season of Lent. We heard today's Old Testament reading last Sunday morning, and I preached about the Ten Commandments and the Summary of the Law as well—Jesus's words from today's New Testament reading. I don't want to repeat all of my remarks from last Sunday, rather I want to build on them in considering our obedience to the commandments, especially in our Lenten journey toward the cross. I want to build on Mother Elisa's fine sermon from this morning as well, taking note of God's love at the heart of the commandments.

The Summary of the Law is one way to outline the Ten Commandments. First there are commandments about loving God, then there are commandments about loving neighbor. They start with worshipping God alone, not having idols, not misusing the name of the Lord, and keeping the Sabbath day holy. Then they move to honoring parents, then toward others more generally: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness, don't covet. These are the basics, in mostly practical terms, of how to love God and love your neighbor.

The passage we heard from Mark tonight is very telling. The scribe asks Jesus what is the greatest commandment, and Jesus answers with two. It seems that the two are connected together. We cannot love God without loving our neighbor, and we only know how to love our neighbor from loving God.

Jesus is not saying anything particularly new to Jews. The scribe was probably familiar with this line of thought. Jesus is actually quoting from two passages in scripture: From Deuteronomy, he quotes from what is called the “Shema” (the Hebrew word for “hear” that begins the passage): “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our 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 strength.” (Dt. 6:4-5). In the Hebrew way of talking, the heart is the seat of thinking, not the head. The heart was not the seat of feeling—that was the gut. That’s why, when Jesus is probably quoting from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, he includes loving God with all your mind.

We are to love the Lord our God with all our soul. This is not the Greek kind of soul that is separated from the body. Rather this is the Hebrew word for one’s whole “being,” integrated as soul and body. We are also to love the Lord our God with all our strength. This word in the Hebrew comes from the adverb “very.” It is kind of like saying that we are to love God with all our “very-ness,” our passion and intensity, our strength and zeal. We are to love God with all of who we are.

This is not a command to love God as if he were a hobby. We are not commanded to pay God lip service, or to remember God twice a year. We are not even commanded to give 10% of ourselves to God. No, God wants 100%. God wants all of who we are to love God completely, without reservation and putting everything else behind that love. This is our covenant with God, our whole life commitment to God that we make as Christians. This is the measure of our self-assessment in Lent.

But this commandment is not alone. Jesus does not stop there, but he also quotes from Leviticus, 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus says on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. We cannot fulfil our obligation to God without loving our neighbor, and we cannot truly love our neighbor without first loving God.

Notice how this all starts with God and branches out to our daily lives from there. The covenant we have with God starts with God’s covenant with us. We love God with all of who we are because of God’s love for us. We learn to love from God and from there we know how to love our neighbor. Love of neighbor is not to be learned in secular terms, but rather from God himself.

As Christians, we follow this same rule, and we learn more about the heart of God’s love. The fullness of God’s self-revelation comes in Jesus Christ. In Jesus we know more about God and we understand God’s love more deeply. As our catechism in the back of the prayer book tells us, Jesus also gives us a new commandment: we must love one another as he has loved us. (John 13:34). We must go beyond loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. We don’t always love ourselves the right way—we either love ourselves too much, or too little, or on the world’s terms rather than God’s terms. But we are to go beyond our own standards and love as Jesus loves us.

And how does Jesus love us? Here is where we find ourselves on the road of Lent. Jesus loved us enough to suffer and die for us. Jesus loved us while we were still sinners. Jesus’ love is not just about commandments, for we surely fail the commandments. Jesus’ love is a self-giving, self-

sacrificing love, a love of grace that gives without deserving, a love of mercy that gives to those who don't love, a love that gives without need for love in return.

This is a love that is more than the way we love ourselves. In Lent we surely come to realize our inability to love this much. And yet, we can learn this love. We can learn this love because this is the way that God loves us. In Lent, we learn that the way of the cross is the way of life and peace. We learn that Jesus' self-giving love on the cross is the greatest love, and from it comes the resurrection and new life.

I find that in human relationships, conflict can be so hard to resolve. We all can find fault; none of us is perfect. I find that reconciliation often takes a step of loving beyond fairness. When someone gives beyond what is required, new opportunities open up. The love of Jesus transforms us, and spreads in our relationships.

This Lent, to learn true repentance, immerse yourself in the love of Jesus. Consider his suffering for you, and the new life that he gives you in his resurrection. The more fully you know the grace of God for you personally, the more you will be able to share that transforming grace with others.

Love God. Love your neighbor. Love one another as Jesus loves you.