

The 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
October 25, 2020  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18  
Psalm 1  
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8  
Matthew 22:34-36

*Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.*

It's still Holy Week.

No, I'm not offering an existential commentary about the never-ending state of affairs in 2020: "Always Holy Week and never Easter!" (like a C. S. Lewis description of Narnia before Aslan).

I'm not offering an existential commentary, no; I'm referring to this morning's gospel, which, according to Matthew, takes place on Tuesday of Holy Week.

And it's been Tuesday of Holy Week for a while now. If we hadn't taken a break from the normal readings – first for St. Francis Day a few weeks back and then for Diocesan Convention last week – we'd have been hearing Matthew describe what happened on Tuesday of Holy Week for four weeks already:

- A month ago, the chief priests and the elders questioned Jesus after his entry into Jerusalem, asking who told him he could say and do all that he was saying and doing;
- Three weeks ago, had we opted NOT to celebrate St. Francis Day, we'd have heard how the chief priests and the Pharisees took offense when Jesus compared them to ungrateful tenant farmers who deserved to be thrown out;
- Two weeks ago, Jesus told a story about our celebrating life with all God's children, not merely those we like or those who are approved of by those in charge;
- And last week, had we not gone off (proverbially) to Convention, we would have heard how Pharisees plotted with Herodians to entrap Jesus in his words.

And for all that, even so we still would have skipped over how the Sadducees weighed in to test Jesus. But you see, for Matthew, that was just another trying time in a tough day in Holy Week. And all of that is the backdrop to this morning's gospel.

All day long – in that very long and hard week – Jesus had been challenged and tested and criticized by the folks in charge of all things religious and political: chief priests and elders and Pharisees and Herodians and Sadducees. (The crowds, by the way, seemed to eat it up! The folks in charge ... not so much.)

And then, as we heard this morning, the Pharisees give it one more try:

*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?*

And Matthew tells us it's a test. But even if Matthew didn't tell us that this was just another test, we'd understand: they're all out to get him, and this question is in no way sincere.

Which makes Jesus' answer all the more poignant. Because it matters not whether they ask in sincerity or out of duplicity, Jesus' answer will be the same:

*"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."*

This is the way Matthew tells it.

Mark and Luke both share the same teaching, but they don't tell it the same way. In Mark, the scribe who asks the question of Jesus seems sincere. He genuinely longs to know. And Jesus tells him the same as his critics: "Love God ..." and "Love your neighbor as yourself ..."

Same answer. Different context.

In Luke, a lawyer knows the answer already. He tells Jesus what Jesus already knows, and Jesus tells him so. "You have given the right answer," Jesus says to him. "Do this, and you will live."

Same answer. Different context.

For me, that's what makes Jesus' answer this morning so poignant. It matters not whether it's a gentle summer morning and life seems carefree and love seems the obvious reply or whether it's an impossible challenge when the fate of the world seems to hang in the balance and when the weight of the world is about to come crashing down on him. Either way, as far as Jesus is concerned, love is the answer.

It's all about love: love God with everything thing you've got; love your neighbor as yourself.

It's that simple. And it's that hard.

Matthew, in particular, I think, wants to make sure we know that it's that hard.

It's not so very hard to love those who love you. It's quite another matter when they've been coming at you time and time again, when they're about to kill you. What do you say then?

Well Jesus says still: love is the answer, whatever the question, whenever it's asked.

I remind you it's still Holy Week. And the love Jesus is talking about here will cost him his life.

Michael Curry has a new book out. It probably won't surprise you that it's about love. In fact, it's called *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times*. (That's a timely title.) In the opening chapter, he says:

It's important that we define the word *love* here clearly, because these days we use the word to mean so many things. We might use it to talk about our spouse or significant other, or about our children ... or about our new sofa ...

Many languages have several words for love, to encompass all the different kinds and dimensions. The three most frequently used in ... the language of the New Testament, are *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. *Eros* is romantic or sexual love. Our English word *erotic* comes from that. *Eros* is what Valentine's Day is about. *Philia* is fraternal or brotherly love, which is why the city of Philadelphia is called the City of Brotherly Love. And finally, there is *agape*, which is love for the other – sacrificial love that seeks the good and well-being of others, of society, of the world.

Unfortunately in English we have only the one word, *love*, for everything from telenovelas to Mother Teresa. And so the different dimensions and nuances have all been muddled together, which has obscured love's true power to instigate a better world. <sup>i</sup>

Now I suspect this isn't news to some, that there are three different New Testament words for love. But it is critically important all the same.

It's critically important for us to pay attention to this because, as you'll probably have guessed, *agape* is the word Jesus uses in this morning's gospel.

And when Jesus speaks of *agape* love – love of God and love of neighbor, he's quoting the Bible. He's quoting Deuteronomy for the first part and Leviticus for the second (in fact from the very chapter of Leviticus we heard a few verses read here a bit earlier this morning).

And if we were to read more deeply into that 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus, it would be all the more clear that the commandment to love our neighbor has little to do with how we might feel about the folks in our neighborhood. It isn't *eros* or *philia*, it's *agape*. It isn't love that looks merely for what one can get or get back from another, but love that looks for how best to give *to* another; it has everything to do with the actions we take to safeguard their well-being:

- Do not be partial to some and deferential to others;
- Do not be a slanderer;
- Be honest in business dealings;
- Speak the hard truth within our families;

Speak the hard truth within our families. That's a challenging one. Not making nice when the family gets together and someone makes racist jokes. Not be silent in the face of hateful lies.

Jim Wallis, on the jacket of Michael Curry's book notes that Michael Curry calls for a harder kind of love of us:

Not the kind of love that sidesteps and softens our response to the most brutal realities of our deepest racist, economic, and human oppression. But rather, like Dr. King and, more importantly, Jesus said, the kind of radical love that may be the only thing that can finally overcome such radical sin.

That's what love is about in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus.

But wait, there's more. If we were to read just a little past the end of our reading this morning, we would hear of God's call to leave enough around the edges of the fields, enough for the poor and for the foreigners to pick for free. Long before Jesus told a story about a Good Samaritan, the Book of Leviticus insisted that "neighbors" are not merely our friends who live next door:

*... you shall love the [immigrant] as yourself, for you were [immigrants] in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*

This is not easy. It is not natural. But this is *agape* love: "sacrificial love that seeks the good and well-being of others, of society, of the world," rather than merely feeling affection for those who are like us – and who like us.

St. Paul uses that same word, *agape*, in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians, that well-loved passage read at so many weddings:

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.*

*It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;  
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.*

*It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*Love never ends.*

When it's read at a wedding, I'll often say that St. Paul is talking about committing to love one another after the wedding and the honeymoon are over: to decide to seek the well-being of the other at all times – when we feel loving AND when we don't; to promise to choose to love one another always – when the other seems lovable AND especially when they don't.

And that's all well and good. But we should know that St. Paul wasn't giving marriage advice. He was fiercely angry, and trying to remind church folk about the values that had brought them together in the first place. Stop badmouthing one another. Stop jostling each other for the best seats at the table. They had lost the love they once had, the *agape*, the commitment to seek always the well-being of the other and to build up the common good of the wider community.<sup>ii</sup>

In Michael Curry's words, they had "obscured love's true power to instigate a better world."

Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. It's that simple. And it's that hard.

And there's not really much more to say. That's my takeaway on the last part of this morning's gospel and the question Jesus asks the Pharisees. I don't think we need to unpack the nuances to get the point that Jesus is sick and tired of all the games his detractors and critics want to play. When all is said and done, Jesus is shutting them up and shutting them down. It's a "mic drop" moment at the end. (BOOM!)

"Stop it!" he's saying to them. "Stop! ... in the name of love."

And to us, I think, he says what he's always said: "Love God with everything you've got; and here's how, love your neighbor as yourself."

It's that simple. And it's that hard.

It's still Holy Week. Jesus knew just how hard it could be.

And yet he held this core belief to the end. And his answer holds steady still.

You don't need me to tell you how hard it is to follow through on that in today's world. The vitriol and the venom. The divisions and the lack of mutual respect. The outright lies and threats. No, you don't need me to tell how hard it can be to love. But maybe you need this word from Jesus this morning – and maybe I do, as well – to remind us that love is still our calling. Not just when we feel like it, not just when it's easy and comes naturally, but especially when we don't, especially when it's challenging and hard.

Now, more than ever: hold on to love. In hard times, when it feels challenged, double down on love. In troubling times, when it feels challenging, put love into action in all you say and in everything you do. I'll close with the words on the cover of the bulletins this morning, for they say the same:



<sup>1</sup> Michael Curry, *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (Penguin Random House, New York, 2020), pp. 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Curry, *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (Penguin Random House, New York, 2020), p. 17.