

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost October 25, 2020

“The First Commandment”

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Good morning, glad to see everyone. Thank you for allowing me to rest after Convention, and I would also like to thank everyone who sent me birthday cards. I can't express how wonderful they made me feel. So, back to worship. Today's Gospel has, at the heart of it, the most basic tenets of ancient theological thought. So let's explore.

First, I would like to put the last few Sundays in order so we can gain a better understanding of what is happening in today's reading. When we look at this chapter of Matthew, we get a glimpse at the pressure Jesus was under to give way to the status quo, when in actuality, Jesus was living out the true example of the scriptures and what his Jewish faith had already been based on for centuries. There are a lot of trials for Jesus - beginning with the cleansing of the temple in chapter 21, followed by three parables that expose religious leadership's failure.

By the time we get to Matthew 22, as you discovered last week, Jesus is being tested on taxes, in order for Jesus to be denounced as a political rebel. He is then presented with a trick question about resurrection and we come to where we are today. Jesus, in all his answers, has silenced the Sadducees. But no, again the status quo desires the last words.

Please let it be known that the Sadducees wanted Jesus to fail. If you can imagine, Jesus is beginning to get a following that continually questions the present infrastructure of society; pointing out that what has occurred is not what God had

in mind. Then you can begin to understand the threat Jesus poses to his culture. Instead of following the rules passed down by tradition, Jesus is declaring God's desire for the good of all people, justice and forgiveness, compassion and understanding, and social economic equality. For those stuck in present unjust tradition – they had good reasons to be upset by Jesus because they were benefiting from the current circumstances.

The interesting thing about Matthew's Gospel and this passage is that although expressed in our language as the lawyer asking a question and giving a test (which seems simple enough and rather harmless), in the original Greek translation the words we recognize as "ask a question or test" is represented by the same word as "temptation". The word used today asking a question or testing is the same for the temptation Jesus experienced when he was alone 40 days and tempted by the Devil. There is reason here then, to believe Matthew is showing us that the present religious system is not God-focused, but possibly evil. This lawyer is tempting Jesus to state something that could lead to an arrest, or at the very least ruin his Holy reputation.

Even though the question begins with "teacher", if the Greek text is considered: in this particular instance, this is not a term of respect, but actually a mockery of Jesus. The Old Testament has 613 commandments, and there is no clear standard for judging which is greatest. Regardless of Jesus' answer, the lawyer by tradition has the ability to respond with further questions designed to put Jesus on the defensive or to cause him to make a mistake.

In one sense, because it is God who gave the commandments, all are of equal importance. However, just as in Biblical times, today's Jewish rabbis speak of some commandments as "heavy" and others as "light," and there is an ongoing

debate regarding the relative importance of various commandments and how to summarize them for ordinary people.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” is from Deuteronomy 6. Jews call it the Shema. The Shema builds on the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus), but it adds the love requirement. In addition to requiring that we love God, the law further commands through the reading of Deuteronomy:

“These words, which I command you this day, shall be on your heart;
and you shall teach them diligently to your children,
and shall talk of them when you sit in your house,
and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down,
and when you rise up.

You shall bind them for a sign on your hand,
and they shall be for symbols between your eyes.
You shall write them on the door posts of your house,
and on your gates”

To fulfill these requirements, Jewish children memorize these verses, and Jewish people wear them in phylacteries on their foreheads, post them in mezuzahs on their doorposts, and repeat them every day of their lives as part of their daily worship. The words of the Shema, recited in daily worship, are truly graven on Jewish hearts. No faithful Jew can argue with the primacy of this commandment. And this is how Jesus handles the lawyer’s question. Note that the God whom we are to love is “your God”—adding a personal and relational dimension to our religious duty.

There is no other moral or spiritual law that you can have prior to loving God since everything springs from God. However how you express that love is entirely in your hands. And that is the next consideration I want to talk about.

If you believe human beings are created in the image of God, or hold the essence of the Creator inside them, then loving God also includes loving yourself. If in the worshipping and loving of God you are not caring for yourself, in essence you are not tending to the love of God.

Loving yourself is often one of the hardest things we do. In fact, studies show we are more critical of ourselves than we are of others. We often feel God calls us to be less than, to be humble or not make much fuss, but per Jesus' teaching we should all be in awe and in gratitude of God together, honoring each other.

Loving God with all you have is the basis of our faith. Which leads us into relationship. Our Gospel emphasizes that even David needed to recognize the sovereignty of God. But Jesus is able to express his relationship with the Almighty as Abba, Father, as shown so many times throughout the Gospels. It is through Christ, we are adopted into family and also call God as our own.

To understand that we have our very being and existence in God is to love self, which of course then extends to all of God's children, and all of creation. Our Diocesan convention spent a lot of time exploring how we, as Episcopal Christians in the past, have failed to love the image of God in our Native and Black brothers and sisters. We can only move forward through understanding where we come from so we can choose the path we want in the future.

I believe the temptation given that day to Jesus, is also given to us, when we are asked to make choices. For the most part in our society it is the elite, the leaders and the lawyers, that tempt us to often go down a less than noble path. But the truth is, the right choice is the basic choice. The ancient one, the first commandment. We need to ask ourselves: is what we are doing honoring God? Is this decision loving the God in me? Is this choice loving the God in the other? A simple basic and ancient revelation, so often neglected.

As we look to changing our clocks next week, we fall back. Let us consider falling back on the basic tenet of our faith. Let's love God with all we are, so we can love ourselves, which can and often does grow into compassion for others. Let us not be tempted to be concerned more with tradition, than with the true meaning of Jesus' life – the Good News - that we are loved by God so much – God sacrificed everything through Jesus – to prove it. Amen.