**Weekend of Sunday, October 29, 2023**

**22nd Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 30/Year A**

**First Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18**

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:34-46**

**Sermon Title: *“The Great Commandments: Love, Serve& Follow”***

**Theme**

*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.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18**

1The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:
 2Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.
 15You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. 16You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.
 17You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. 18You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8**

1You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, 2but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. 3For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, 4but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. 5As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; 6nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, 7though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. 8So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

**Gospel: Matthew 22:34-46**

34When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37He said to him, “ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”
 41Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” 43He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,
 44‘The Lord said to my Lord,
 “Sit at my right hand,
  until I put your enemies under your feet”’?
45If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” 46No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Sermon

Today, the readings we had read to us moments ago, define what is at the core of a *life of discipleship*. A *life of discipleship* is a concept that continues to surface in my vocation as a pastor. Maybe you’ve noticed that I use the concept a lot. I hope you know what it means, but even if you don’t know now, you will by the time I am finished with this sermon.

When I refer to a *life of discipleship,* I am referring to both what is at the core of one’s belief system, *and* how one lives out their belief system in their daily life. What is the point of having a belief system if one doesn’t live it out?

In Leviticus chapter 19, we hear the voice of the LORD as the LORD dictates what the life of discipleship looks like for His Chosen People, the Israelites. (We Americans might have an issue with this. That is our problem.) Throughout the book of Leviticus, the LORD tells Moses to tell the Israelites how it is going to be. In verse one,

1The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:
 2Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

Now, this is the congregation participation part of this sermon.

Was the LORD making an offer that the Israelites could take or leave? No!

Did the LORD *suggest* that the Israelites ought to be holy? No!

The LORD said, “You *shall* be holy. This is not a question. It's not a demand! It is a proclamation! The reason I say that it is a proclamation and not a demand is because of what follows: *for I the Lord your God am holy.*

This only makes sense to me. I hope it makes sense to you. The relationship between God and the Israelites has to be holy because God is holy.

I preached a sermon series several years ago on the five covenants in scripture and this one is the Mosaic Covenant. A covenant is a commitment by two or more parties. At its core, the Mosaic Covenant is pretty simple: The LORD says, “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” Our First Reading for today puts more flesh on those bones as the LORD clarifies how the Israelites will live out their lives of discipleship.

You see, holiness is not just about ritual purity with God, but also about the relationships the Israelites had with other people, especially their fellow Israelites, but not limited to their fellow Israelites. We have just a few of the commands of that covenant listed for us in the First Reading, but throughout the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, we have 613 commandments, 248 that are “do’s” and 365 that are “do not’s,” that when made part of the DNA of the Israelites, will clearly separate them from all the other nations of the world. And that is exactly what the LORD wanted the Israelites to be – a light to the nations that would draw the other nations to them, and they too would become holy.

But the First Reading is not just a snippet from the Old Testament that only applies to the ancient Israelites and has nothing to do with us. On the contrary, the Law, those 613 commandments of the LORD do apply to us, however, Jesus said,

Matthew 5:17"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come *not to abolish* *but to fulfill*.

What does Jesus mean? He means that while the Law applies to us, he has already paid the price for what we do not or cannot fulfill.

That does not mean that we can disregard the Law because we’ve already been given a pass. It means that *given* that we have already been forgiven, we ought to try to fulfill the Law all the more, knowing that when we fall short, the love, grace, and mercy of God revealed in Jesus Christ will cover our shortcomings.

Now I made a snarky comment about “we Americans” a moment ago. Let me explain. If you can hear my voice, then you are Christian (period). Let me proclaim that you are a Christian and that ought to permeate every cell of your being. The example of Jesus Christ is your model for living out your life of discipleship (period). And when we fall short, and we will because we are trying, we know that the love, grace, and mercy of God revealed in Jesus Christ will cover our shortcomings.

But we Americans don’t like to be told what to do. As individual Americans, we will decide what laws and commands we will comply with – both civilly and biblically. Am I right?

Maybe that’s not exclusively an American thing, because in the Gospel Reading from Matthew, we have a story about Jesus and his adversaries, the Pharisees. Now this reading has an awkward beginning.

34When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees,

What Matthew is referring to is the previous story in which the Sadducees, another sect of Judaism, that took issue with Jesus, had proposed a human scenario meant to trip him up, in their eyes. Without going into all the details, Jesus deferred to scripture and told them they were wrong in their theology. The Pharisees were the opposite religious party at the time, not unlike our Democrats and Republicans, and so the Pharisees were delighted that Jesus had silenced them. And now they want to be the ones to take Jesus down.

They ask Jesus,

36“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

I wonder why the Pharisees are asking. Are they throwing up a white flag of surrender, recognizing they can’t possibly fulfill all 613 commandments? I really don’t think so, because I think they think they are fulfilling the Law! So they don’t really care about Jesus’ answer because no matter what he says, choosing any one of the 613 at the exclusion of the other 612, they think they’ve caught him!

But Jesus knows the truth about human nature. Since the fall into sin, human beings have rebelled against God. And the Jews at least, have used the Law as a checklist for proving their godliness, and they *know* they are more godly than Jesus because sometimes he ignores the law!

Knowing their hearts are hardened against him, Jesus doesn’t select a single law. Rather, he condenses all of the law and prophets into two commandments:

37“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

And when I think about it, he’s right. If we just focused on these two commandments, all the others would be fulfilled. And isn’t that enough to do?

In the Second Reading from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians Paul reflects on his ministry in Thessalonica. He emphasizes that their preaching was not in vain but came with sincerity, driven by their desire to please God, not people. Paul and his companions served with love, not seeking glory for themselves but sharing not only the gospel but their very lives. We can use Paul’s letter as an example for us to follow. In our lives of discipleship, let us be:

* sincere,
* driven by our desire to please God, not people,
* serve one another and the stranger with love,
* not seeking glory for ourselves
* but sharing the gospel with our lives of discipleship.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Now, let's draw these passages together. The passage from Leviticus reminds us that holiness is not just about rituals but about how we treat others, emphasizing love and justice. The passage from 1 Thessalonians shows us the heart of a servant, who serves with sincerity and selflessness. And the passage from Matthew encapsulates the essence of God's commands - love for God and love for our neighbor. This is what it means to live a life of discipleship.

So, how do we apply these teachings in our lives? I’m so glad you asked.

First, let us strive to live holy lives by loving and serving others as an expression of our love for God.

Second, let us serve with sincerity and selflessness, sharing the gospel not only in words but also in actions.

Third, let us wholeheartedly embrace Jesus' teaching on love as the foundation of our faith, and remember that all we do must reflect our love for God and our neighbor.

In conclusion, these passages invite us to love, serve, and follow Jesus with sincerity and selflessness. As we seek to love our neighbor as ourselves and love God with all our being, we fulfill the heart of God's commandments. May we be inspired to live out these teachings daily, for in doing so, we demonstrate the transformative power of Christ's love to the world.

**Prayer**

Loving God, you not only welcome us, you receive us into yourself. Give us the courage to be so open to others, to let them become so dear to us, that we might share not only your Gospel, but also our lives, through Christ who makes room for us all. Amen