

Weekend of Sunday, October 25, 2020
21st Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 30/Proper 25/Year A
First Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:34-40
Sermon Title: “The Test of Our Hearts”

Theme

Put on the spot by the Pharisees, Jesus displays wisdom by summarizing the law of God in just two commandments and by demonstrating the Messiah must be more than the son of David.

Texts

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.

Matthew 22:34-40

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.”

Sermon

This weekend we celebrate a special day in the life of the church. It is Reformation Sunday, a day upon which we give thanks to God for the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther and other reformers for their efforts to correct the path of the church catholic. As the Lutheran church, we ought to take interest in the day.

And since we are still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are using Reformation Sunday to celebrate the confirmation of six of our youth. They should have been confirmed last Pentecost at the glorious Eastern Conference Service of Confirmation presided over by our Bishop, but alas, that service was a casualty of the pandemic.

The Gospel Reading for today continues in the same hostile conversation that Jesus had been having with his adversaries - the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Priests, the Scribes, and the Elders of the people - since he entered the Holy City of Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover.

During the pandemic isolation, I read a book about these groups and what I learned that few of us are probably aware of, is that these factions hadn't gotten along with each other for hundreds of years. There have been and will continue to be bloody battles between them until the Temple is destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. After that, the Pharisees prevailed into what we know today as modern rabbinic Judaism. I bring this little fact up because, although generally they hated each other and were willing to kill each other, when it came to the subject of Jesus, on this they agreed. He must die.

That book was eye-opening. I didn't realize that the religious culture of the Middle East has been so blood-thirsty for thousands of years. We should not be surprised that Islamic terrorism and Zionism exists today. But I digress. Back to the Gospel Reading.

Likely the context is Tuesday of Holy Week and their resolve to be done with *the Jesus problem* continued to build. Having been frustrated by him at avoiding every attempt to entrap thus far, the Pharisees made another attempt by asking him a question intended to test him.

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

Notice first, that since his triumphal entry into the holy city of Jerusalem, through the last chapter or so, though he had been confronted by a long list of the *who's who* of the Jewish faith: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Priests, the Scribes, and the Elders of the people, they called him "Teacher." Either they were giving him false flattery or they honestly recognized him as a significant teacher. And yet, either way, ironically, their solution was, he must die. Fascinating!

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

Unlike the Jesus of late who gave snarky answers to their questions, Jesus answered,

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.”

These words have been fussed over by Christians ever since they left his lips. The first verse, verse 37, comes from Deuteronomy 6:5 and that passage is just one verse of a much larger passage of instructions that the LORD God gave to Moses to tell the Israelites just before they cross over the Jordan River to possess the land that God had promised to their ancestors. This is a big deal. It is also the biggest unkept promise of the Israelites. But even though the Israelites had neglected it, Jesus had not, and he brought it back front and center. In fact, he said, “This is the greatest and first commandment.”

And then, Jesus added, ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

This verse comes from a much larger passage from Leviticus which is a long list of “do not’s” this verse being the only “you shall” in the passage, which ought to indicate how important it is.

You see, according to Jesus, a person cannot say they love God and then hate their neighbor or themselves. Remember that he is talking to *religious professionals* who

would have been well-versed in these passages, those who I am sure would say they loved God, and yet they were plotting the murder of another. Do you see the irony?

And by the way, our First Reading is from that same section of Leviticus and the most significant verse in that passage is verse 2:

²You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Which brings me back to our Confirmands. On Sunday morning, Noah Anzevino, Noah Chizmar, Karley Gerst, Joshua Muntean, Allison Powell, and Alexis Vargo will be called up and given the opportunity to claim the Christian faith that we have been studying intensely for the last year as their own.

I will remind these six that thirteen or so years ago their parents stood up in front of the congregation, this one or another one, cradling them in their arms, and made some important promises about raising their child in the faith before they were baptized. Their faith and those promises mattered to them, or the confirmands wouldn't be standing in front of the congregation.

This may be a first for me, but I know all of their grandparents too because they worship here. Their faith and promises mattered when the parents of the confirmands were baptized, and arguably, because of their grandparent's faith, those confirmands stand before the congregation.

But today is their day. They will get to stand up in front of God, their parents, their grandparents, and this congregation and state for themselves, "I believe."

Listen to these words of admonition again.

From the First Reading, ²You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

And from the Gospel Reading, 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."

No matter your age or stage of life, these passages make a good mantra, a creed, a personal mission statement for yourselves, because it clears up what I call, "The Test of Our Hearts." If we, like the ancient Israelites, can agree with these admonitions, and then live according to them, then things will go well for us.

To those confirmands I say, let this not be the last day of your life of discipleship but merely a transition from child-student member to full-fledged member of this church with all the rights and privileges and responsibilities that go along with that. Look at the example of your parents and grandparents who love and serve their Lord Jesus Christ by participating and serving his church.

And for the rest of us, Reformation Day and Confirmation Day serve as baptismal remembrance days. Likely there was a day when we stood in front of a congregation and claimed the faith as our own. Martin Luther, the founder of our faith tradition, said that we need to return to the font of our baptism daily to reclaim the same faith as our own. So when the time comes, all of us will stand up with these six confirmands and claim, "I believe."

And then, speaking to the more mature members of our fellowship, remember these confirmands and invite them into your ministries so they can figure out where they fit in.

Prayer

Loving Lord Jesus, you have seen fit to form your faithful people into the fellowship you called the church. Bless your church today, as we celebrate the confirmation of six young men and women. And bless this fellowship with their full and active participation. Let our church always be a fellowship that is holy because you are holy, and that loves God and other people as we love ourselves. We pray this in your name. Amen