

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
Psalm 90:1-6,13-17
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
MATHEW 22:34-36

The Greatest Commandments

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all you mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

There are 613 commandments in the Torah, first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians commonly call the Old Testament). The Pharisees were a Jewish sect which emphasized meticulous obedience to these laws as *the* way to be a faithful Jew, and the “lawyer” who questioned Jesus in today’s Gospel passage was an expert in *religious* law – one of a number of people who might have had debates on just this question: which commandment was the greatest?

In matters of faith and practice, it sometimes is possible to “concentrate on the trees and miss the forest” – to be so absorbed in the minutiae of faith and practice that one misses the really big themes – the point of it all, of which the details are, well, details. That is one of the weaknesses of the Pharisaic approach to faith and practice (an approach which some 21st century Christians sometimes fall into as much as some 1st century Jews).

Jesus cut to the very heart not only of the religious law but to all the teachings of the prophets in the historical books and the prophetic books of the Hebrew Scriptures. He summarized hundreds of pages in two sentences – ones people could easily memorize. But he did not invent these commandments: he was quoting Moses in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. The 10 Commandments – and many other commandments – are detailed examples of some of the specific behaviors called for by people who try to obey the greatest commandments.

But before we reflect in detail on these two commandments, let’s remember that God gave them to God’s people *after* God had unilaterally reached out to God’s people, *without preconditions* with God’s *own* love and power.

Moses spoke to people who had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, led, nourished and taught by God in the wilderness of Sinai, and brought to the brink of settling The Promised Land *because God had adopted the people of Israel as God’s special treasure* among all the peoples of the earth. Not because the Israelites, as slaves in Egypt, were enormously devout and hopeful; they were enormously depressed, and for good reason. Not because the Israelites, in the wilderness, had been perfectly obedient; they had been very human, which means their behavior had varied, uh, widely. And some of them were punished severely by God. But those who remained, and the people of Israel as an ongoing group – *our* spiritual ancestors as well as those of today’s Jews – had and have God’s **steadfast love** as part of the **covenant** God made with them.

When Jesus was speaking to the religious lawyer and repeating these very same commandments, God in the person of Jesus was nearing the climax of God's even greater intervention in world history. This time, through Jesus, God offers adoption as God's people to any and all people who turn to God in faith, and offers not only liberation, wisdom, strength, guidance and community here and now – a valuable package in itself – but the hope for personal conquest of death and new life in heaven, and the hope for participation in the transformation of the whole world into the Kingdom of God.

So, the crucial *prelude* to our hearing these, the greatest commandments, is this: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all who believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” God has *unilaterally* reached out and offered a relationship to people of **abundant life**, both now and forever. **Therefore** we should *respond* by “loving God with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our minds and by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

As it is written in 1 John 4:19, “we love because God first loved us.” The love commandments do not “come out of the clear blue sky” as things we “ought” to do for some inexplicable reason, nor are these commandments what we need to obey in order to earn God's love. We already have God's love. That *doesn't* mean God is permissive or a “wuss”; God has certain expectations of us on our end (like repentance and faithfulness) in order for us to hold up our end of the covenant, but the covenant, let's be clear, was initiated by God.

God put God's love and power out here to transform us by suffering and dying on our behalf, so that we human beings might have a second chance – which we desperately need. Obedience to the commandments to love God and our neighbors is expected as our response as *a thank you to God for what God has already done for us*.

Lest the story of Jesus be interpreted too individualistically, as though Jesus wants to save each of us as individuals without connecting us to each other as well, we have the commandment to love our “neighbors” – who Jesus (in the story of the Good Samaritan) clearly indicates to be anyone in need, no matter where they live or how different they are from us. Lest the story of Jesus' offer of new life be interpreted only in another-worldly sense, his story is anchored in the nitty-gritty of Israel, liberation from oppression, from thirst, from hunger, from discord, from idolatry, and *from communal fear*. And Jesus' story is followed by the stories of the people through whom he worked after his resurrection – his followers and their *communities* as described in the New Testament books which follow the Gospels. And Jesus' work continues, of course, in **us**, in you and me as individuals – and in this **community** of faith called St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Monmouth Junction, New Jersey, USA.

Living our lives as individuals and as a community by striving to follow these commandments – which are both simple and really hard – with *an attitude of gratitude* opens the door to the **abundant life** which Jesus promised to those who follow him (see John 10:10)

“Faith is a team sport” I like to say, but faith is also an “individual sport,” so loving God starts by making time, as individuals, for God *every day*. It may be only a few minutes of prayer and perhaps reading a Bible passage – Forward Day by Day booklets offer help here – but that is definitely far better than nothing. And prayer,

includes listening to God and expecting God's responses to show up, sometimes in unexpected ways. Loving God also includes the personal discipline of church participation, ideally weekly somewhere, or at times when that's not possible spending extra time in prayer on Sunday.

Love, after all, involves a *relationship* and relationships always require relating. If someone told you that they "really love" their mother – they "call her once a year on Mother's Day" – what would you think of that person? The fact that you are here in church on a Sunday in October (not *just* on Christmas or Easter) shows that you understand that your and our relationship with God as individuals requires our attention regularly.

Now, the fact is that disciplines of personal prayer time and Sunday worship are counter-cultural in this part of our country, but those very facts mean that people who do them may be more likely to do them out of personal exploration, need, desire and commitment than because of social pressure – or because "there's nothing else to do on Sunday" which once upon a time might have been the case some places! So, however many there might be of us who are in this sanctuary at any given service, we are here because we *want* to be – which means we're a step further along as disciples. And, in keeping with the spirit of the apostle Barnabas (whose name means "son of encouragement"), we **encourage** each other with our participation in worship, one way we show our love for God.

When we contemplate the commandment to "love our neighbors as ourselves," it may seem both hopelessly idealistic and unachievable. But when Jesus, our "coach", tells us to do something *hard*, is it because he wants us to fail – or because he wants us to *grow*?

Let us step forward in faith in the belief that Jesus wants us to *grow* as his disciples and as people. That means looking for opportunities to show our kindness and care for others with God's help. Our work places, homes and schools can be stressful places – maybe a little more so lately. Let each and all of us ask God how we can, in the words of the prophet Micah, "do justice, *love kindness* and walk humbly with our God."

Let us ask God for "the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference." We don't have to be Mother Teresa – who herself said, "We can do no great things, just small things with great love."

"Small things" might not seem so small to the people on the receiving end. Some years ago, a parishioner told me about having trouble with the electrical service to her house. Naturally, she called PSE&G. The crew came out, and after examining the problem, the lead guy told her that the problem was not with their lines, but with her house's connections, and that she would need to hire an electrician to fix it.

Well, she broke down. She told him the truth: her husband had deserted her and the kids for parts unknown and she was working as hard as she could but was hanging onto the house by her fingernails, and there was no way she could afford an electrician. The PSE&G guy listened patiently took back the copy of the report he'd given her, and

tore it up. “Don’t worry, lady; we’ll take care of it.” They did. The following Sunday she was still shedding tears of amazement and gratitude.

We can also enlist our brothers and sisters in Christ here in this community when people we know need our prayers. One of St. Barnabas’ most import *outreach* ministries is *prayer* – we pray with and for not only those within our parish but also far beyond. Many of the names on the Sunday intercessions list and many of the people for whom the Prayer Chain prays are people who our members know and our members ask, “Would you like us to pray for you?” *Whatever happens next*, they are *not alone* but are cared for by a *community* of faith.

Life is tough enough; nobody said you had to go through it alone.

People can be as private as they wish to be here – let me be clear about that. People can simply pray on their own and not tell anyone anything if they wish. But, if someone *wants* to be lifted up by a community of caring, sharing as few or as many details as he or she may wish, we will lift them up. Prayer chain ministry is 30 people dedicated to the ministry of intercessory prayer – and yes, we do like thanksgivings as well as prayer for healing and for strength and guidance! When we pray, we divide sorrows and multiply thanksgivings, and we have done more dividing and multiplying here in this sanctuary than a 4th Grade classroom.

So today, we give thanks for a new job for a parishioner *and* we pray for those who are looking for work. And there are plenty of people sitting in these pews who have been through stuff – unemployment, illness, family issues, or bereavement, for example – who remember being carried through challenging times in part by this community’s practice of “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Our *tangible* outreach ministries also embody “love your neighbor as yourself.” Take the tangible gifts we collect for people in the shelters for survivors of domestic violence. Domestic violence is a huge problem – but not so huge that each of us and all of us together can’t do something. Our current “Client #2” is in a shelter because she and her unborn child were not safe, and now, in the shelter, they are. She is working days and going to school nights to support and better herself. Our motto is “charity is good, empowerment is better, peace and justice are best.” We are her *allies* and friends as she works to empower herself, just as we were for another local woman who we helped with a community college class scholarship last year, just as we were this year with our gift to Episcopal Relief and Development’s program of micro-loans for women entrepreneurs in impoverished countries around the world. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” *The world is our neighborhood*. Same with today’s CROP walk for the hungry: South Brunswick, Darfur, they’re all part of our neighborhood. And our regular pledge dollars are helping to put a roof on a school in Liberia, educate seminarians from El Salvador, and support inner-city churches in Camden, Elizabeth, New Brunswick and Trenton. “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

And simply gathering here at St. Barnabas for worship, fellowship and life-long learning is an experience in building a diverse community based on loving our neighbors in the pews. Some of us have come from churches where we felt we weren’t fully included. One newcomer looked at our photo bulletin board in astonishment and declared that in her home church there were *no* single parents. *We’re different*. Another

family told me they had been the only African family in another church. *We're different.* Other people experienced churches which were not handicap-accessible, which had “dress codes” they couldn't deal with, or a political “litmus test”, or churches which featured anti-gay rhetoric, or which had no inter-racial couples, or which looked like country clubs. Others came here because their previous church had no room for doubts and struggles – or didn't allow children to make a peep in church.

We're different. We are St. Barnabas. Our “neighbors” include our own members, who include many, many different kinds of people. We're all works in progress. We're a long way from perfect, as individuals or as a community, but we do know the only one who *is* perfect: Jesus Christ. It is Christ's love which we receive individually and collectively, and Christ's love which, given back to him and to our neighbors, near and far, is *multiplied*. We don't have to be smarter than a 4th Grader: we just need to know how to multiply. Our love multiplied by Jesus equals the abundant life.

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