

Sermon for 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

Those who would trap Jesus are told by him what they need for life, for health, for wholeness, for salvation. They do not take it in, just as they do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. For when you approach someone to test him or to trip her up, it probably means you have winning rather than listening and learning or the possibility for repentance or transformation in your heart. Of course, this is a danger visited upon us in election season – actually in this era in which our country has become so polarized. This desire to pounce, to diminish, to obliterate.

Jesus, asked to choose one commandment as the greatest, in his answer condenses the entire witness of the Hebrew scriptures—all the law and the prophets. He says, “‘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.’” There is “an inseparability between these two commandments” even as each contains its own integrity. God is the ultimate focus for human life. To nurture it we need “prayer, public and private worship, the aggressive search for truth about God, and a serious wrestling with issues of faith.”¹

Yet the second commandment helps keep us honest in the sight of God and in our relationships with others. It gives us a way for the love of God to find practical expression. Some of us can forget that loving neighbor first involves knowing and loving ourselves as beloved of God – more difficult to achieve for some than others because of the accidents of family and birth and sexual orientation in a society in which not everyone is regarded in the same light or treated in the same way.

And our neighbor: Is our neighbor not intended to be the rest of the world? What are our actions to be when we love our neighbors? For example, how do we respond to a wall that keeps our neighbors out and separates children from parents? The editorial board of the *New York Times* suggests that the wall at our southern border, with “all its cruelty and uselessness,” symbolizes an obsession with keeping neighbors out. In light of proposed policies which would make it more difficult and expensive for foreign students, exchange visitors, and journalists to study or work in our country, it gives a caution: “Far more insidious, though, is the invisible wall of restrictive policies, procedural changes or extreme vetting directives, lacking any justification beyond a vague and unsubstantiated reference to national security.”¹

Love of neighbors must take into account the systems and structures in which we encounter them. We know how it is, at times, and in spite of our best intentions, really, really difficult to love the people who live just next door, especially when they may have political signs that promote candidates

¹ Walter Brueggemann *et al.*, **Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year A** (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 542.

for office – yes, deliberately and precisely in our faces -- whose values seem to be ones that threaten our own and all that we cherish the most.

Unfortunately, Jesus does not tell his hearers here just how one can live with so singular, so compelling a focus – to live with “all” when our lives are scattered, when our motives are mixed, when we feel threatened, when we wonder will COVID ever end. What might it feel like, to be loving God with a unity of heart, soul and mind? Surely, it would change how we are in the world and how we define ourselves. Moreover, it seems like only the saints truly love their neighbor as themselves – and that seems to involve a level of sacrifice that is incomprehensible to us.

I came across a documentary the other day on the Canadian poet Leonard Cohen which I had first seen in high school. It made a huge impression on me then—it was the first time I really thought on my own about what a state of grace entails. Cohen is Jewish, not Christian, with a Buddhist practice, as well. He spoke of getting up in the morning with his main concern being whether or not he was in a state of grace. And then he described it as *“that kind of balance with which you ride the chaos that you find around you. Not a matter of resolving the chaos as there is something arrogant and war-like about putting the world in order but having that kind of an escape ski, down over a hill, just going through the contours.”* Now, I might define a state of grace differently, but grace as balance is a concept that appeals to me. I think Jesus offers us a sort of grace or balance in regarding the relationship between love of God and love of self and neighbor. You can also regard grace as that still point on which everything hinges, that point of balance between love of God and love of neighbor upon which we should seek to live--actually the only way in which we truly flourish.

Many of you will have heard that Bishop William H. Love announced his retirement as of February 1, 2021, with a terminal sabbatical as of January 1, after 14 years of serving the Diocese of Albany as Bishop. This is in response to much prayer and discernment and anguish, I’m sure, on Bishop Love’s part after the Hearing Panel of the Episcopal Church’s determined unanimously that he “has violated Canon IV.4.a....[and] Canon I.18” related to the discipline of The Episcopal Church in his refusal to allow same-sex marriages. His resignation marks the end of an era and will inaugurate a new time in the history of this Diocese, with ecclesiastical authority being held by the Standing Committee upon his resignation until the next bishop is called.

So, it seems particularly poignant to read the passage from Deuteronomy which closes the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible known as the Torah, for two reasons. The first is the impending change in the Diocese of Albany with the retirement of Bishop Love. The second is because we will celebrate the feast of All Saints next Sunday. We will lift up in prayer and memory loved ones who have died in the last year, but also those whose remains are interred in our Columbarium, for their legacy lives through us here in this sacred space. In our text, Moses dies after his more than four decades of leadership of his people. It seems sad that the place where he was buried was not remembered by succeeding generations.

Moses, a faithful and courageous servant and lover of God and tireless advocate for his people, being human, has not lived a perfect life. He doubted God's promise to provide him a means of providing water for his ever-complaining people at Meribah. His doubt results in God's decision that Moses will not actually enter the Promised Land. Yet here we find both God's judgment – which seems harsh to us--and God's mercy. God gives Moses an expansive glimpse of the land promised many years before which had sustained his people as they escaped slavery and traveled all these years in the wilderness. There is no hint in the text that Moses feels any resentment at God; he has gained spiritual maturity through the grace of God and trusts that others will continue God's work to bring the people to their promised home. God blesses Moses with vigor up until his peaceful death.

While the people weep for Moses for thirty days, it is a set time to enable them to grieve with the passing of their leader but also then to move on with their lives, to move on into the fulfillment of God's promise with the new leadership that God has provided in the person of Joshua. May we be at peace with all the emotions we may be feeling as we think about the election, as we think about the Diocese of Albany, as we think about St. Andrew's now, for a time, without our beloved parish administrator. May we stay always rooted in the commandment to love with singleness of heart – to love God, to love ourselves, to love our neighbors. This is our call, this is the mission of St. Andrew's, this is the witness of the Gospel.

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¹ Editorial Board, "New Visas Limits Would Be a Self-inflicted Wound for the U.S.," **New York Times**, Oct [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/opinion/visas-trump-students-journalists-us.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage] October 24, 2020.