

Pentecost 19, Proper 25A, 102311
All Saints Episcopal Church

Love God. Love people. God loves us.

In the name of God, the Creator, the Redeemer, and the One who gives us life. Amen.

"Love God. Love people. God loves us." Seven short, simple words. Matter-of-fact. Straightforward. Easy to understand. We used these words today in the Godly Play Sunday School class in telling the story of the *Ten Best Ways to Live* - that is, the Ten Commandments. These short sentences are another way to answer the question that Jesus answered in this morning's Gospel reading.

Today, the Pharisees are getting into the mix again, since the Sadducees didn't want to ask Jesus any more questions after he escaped another one of their traps (verses in between the Gospel we read last week and the one we read just now). One of the Pharisees asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment. Now there were approximately 613 different commandments at the time. The trap was obvious: how could one choose one out of that many? But if Jesus picked one over all the other 612, then wouldn't he be saying that all the rest don't really matter so much? It was another catch-22 situation, like the question about paying taxes to Caesar.

So Jesus summarizes the law: Love God. It was probably the most non-controversial thing Jesus ever said. Everyone knew the passage from Deuteronomy. Love people. Everyone knew the part of Leviticus that said 'love your neighbor as yourself.' They learned those passages and recited them from childhood on. But Jesus was not concerned with thinking up some clever and original answer so much as he was with whether or not people were actually living those commandments.

It's an age-old problem for any group that has rules and a mission: which is it that makes us bona fide members of our group? Is it adherence to the letter of the law, or the spirit of the law? Is it 'which rule is the most important' or 'how do we act out the intent of the rule'?

As Christians, we have been caught up since the beginning over these kinds of questions. Do Gentiles need to be Jews first in order to become Christians, or can they just become Christians from the get-go? Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father and

the Son or from the Father only? That question led to the split between western Christianity, which produced the Roman Catholic Church, and eastern Christianity, which produced eastern Orthodoxy. And my question is: how could anyone know what the answer is?

In the 1600s, the Dutch Reform Church in the Netherlands almost split over the issue of whether God decided to send a messiah before the fall - because God knew the fall would happen (that was called *supralapsarianism*) - or did God decide to send the messiah only after the fall happened because only then was the messiah necessary (that was called *infralapsarianism*). And my question is: how could anyone know what God knew? And another question is: why does it matter in the grand scheme of things?

And we're not immune in the Anglican Church or the Episcopal Church or even in this diocese. Our churches have split over prayer books, women's ordination, the ordination of LGBT persons, charismatic vs. traditional liturgies. Which prevails: right belief or right practice? The problem is that having the right answer and *living* the right answer are two different things.

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Marcus Borg says that there are three statements that explain what it means to be Christian:

1. Being Christian is about loving God and loving what God loves. Of course, loving God is the main point in Jesus' summary of the law from Deuteronomy. Loving what God loves? That means loving the whole world. God doesn't love just me, or just you and me, not just Episcopalians, not just Christians, not even just human beings. God loves the whole world and wants it to be whole. Which leads to the second point:
2. Being a Christian means becoming the kind of person who can love God and love what God loves. Becoming. Transforming. On a path that involves practice. Practicing becoming more and more deeply centered in God by paying attention to the relationship, spending time in it and being present to it. We do this through worship and prayer, not because God needs it, but because worship and prayer transform us.
3. The third statement: being a Christian is about being part of a community of transformation. The Christian tradition and the Christian community are means to the end of being transformed. We are formed and reformed by the church community and it is a life-long process. As you can probably tell by now, this

process has very little to do with belief; belief doesn't have much transformative power. We can believe all the right things and still be mean, for instance.

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This love, of course, is the kind of love that is not about affection, but is all about commitment. Most of you know that last weekend I went to Atlanta to preside at the marriage of my niece and her now-husband. Neither one of them is much into church. They are of that age. The wedding wasn't in a church and they didn't want a traditional sort of service. But Mary Grace was raised in the church and she remains and Josh has become part of a wonderfully transformative Christian community. So we created a service together that satisfied them, and satisfied me, and ended up satisfying everyone who was present as well.

They chose what is called a handfasting ceremony. Handfasting originated in medieval Scotland. It involved the bride and groom making a series of vows about their commitment to each other, such as promising, when one gets angry at the other, to use the heat of the anger and using it to temper the strength of their union, or promising to share each other's laughter, each other's dreams. After each of the vows, a cord was wrapped around their clasped hands until the last vow was made. Then all of the cords were tied together. (It is the origin of the phrase 'tying the knot.')

Of course, they can't stay literally tied together forever like some weird version of a three-legged race or conjoined twins. So they take their hands out of the tied cords and wear rings that symbolize the cords that bound them to each other. It was a surprisingly emotional ceremony for them, for the community gathered that pledged their support for Mary Grace and Josh, and for me as well. It felt like a true pledge of commitment, not just a ceremony that is marked by pretty words. Of course they have much affection for each other - that other kind of love. But they are committed to the well-being of each other as well and, because of that commitment, they are committed to the well-being of others, too.

So, here we are in a community that can transform us into people who can love God and love people. But who will be convinced of God's love if we won't risk sharing our own love - that is, not affection, but commitment - with each other? If we write checks to charities and drop off canned goods for the food pantry, but we look down and walk away when we see people in need on the streets, how authentic are our efforts? Who will be convinced of God's open embrace for all of us if we do not open our own selves fully to people who are different from us? Who will be convinced that God is moved by

our pain and suffering, if we ourselves are untouched by the human pain we confront each day? If we invoke words like peace and justice but still hide behind claims of national security, or personal security, who will be convinced that we are sharing God's dream for the world?

If we act, not just believe, if we allow ourselves to be transformed, we will be living out what we know to be true. We will be embodying the gospel that we seek to share.

So let this community of Christ be one of transformation for all of us as we gather here to worship and to pray. Let us be transformed into Christ's body. Let us share ourselves with one another. It is in doing the right things that we are transformed. And it is in doing the right things that the world is transformed into what God dreams the world to be - a world of justice, peace and mercy.

Love God. Love people. God loves us. Thanks be to God!