

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

*Love God. Love people. God loves us.*

In the name of God, the One who loves us. Amen.

"Love God. Love people. God loves us." Seven short, simple words. Matter-of-fact. Straightforward. Easy to understand. The Godly Play Sunday School class uses those words 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 is asked in this morning's Gospel reading.

Today, the Pharisees are once again trying to trap Jesus by asking him questions that, if he answers in one way will get him in trouble with the Roman occupation, or, if he answers another way will get him in trouble with the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders. One of the Pharisees - a lawyer - asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment. Now there were approximately 613 different commandments at that time. The trap was obvious: how could one choose only one out of so 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: first he says, "Love God." It was probably the most non-controversial thing Jesus ever said. Everyone knew the passage from Deuteronomy. Then he says, "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 concerned with whether or not people were actually living out 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 when we adhere to the letter of the law, or when we hold fast to the spirit of the law? Is it 'which rule is the most important' or 'how do we act out the intent of the rule'?

We have been caught up since the beginning of Christianity over these kinds of questions. Do Gentiles need to become Jews first in order to then become Christians, or can they just become Christians from the get-go? Is the source of the Holy Spirit from

both the Father and the Son or from the Father only? This question of origin is known as the '*filioque*' clause. That controversy and two others - one over the use of leavened or unleavened bread at the Eucharist and one over whether the idea of the primacy of St. Peter over the other apostles means that the Pope has primacy over all other bishops, or even over the Church Universal - led to the Great Schism between western Christianity, which became known as the Roman Catholic Church, and eastern Christianity, which became Eastern Orthodoxy in the year 1054.

Several hundred years later, there was the Protestant Reformation, where people who wanted reform in the Roman Church split over a variety of reasons into a number of different denominations. And, of course, the Anglican Church came into being when King Henry VIII disagreed with the Pope over who was the Head of the Church in England. People often think it was all about the divorce, but things were more complicated than that; basically, though, it was a fight over who got control.

In the 1600s, some of my ancestors in the Dutch Reform Church in the Netherlands almost split over the issue of whether God had already decided to send a messiah before the 'fall' of Adam and Eve - because God knew the fall would happen - or whether God decided to send the messiah only after the fall happened because only then was the messiah necessary.

At about the same time that my mother's side of the family was arguing in the Netherlands, my father's side of the family was participating in the Reformation in France. They were Huguenots, Protestants who wanted reform in the Roman Catholic Church. For a while they were tolerated by the powers that be, though they were very much the minority, but after a period of time they fell out of favor and were subject to outrageous persecution. Finally, King Louis XIV sent troops to hunt them down and confiscate their property; half a million Hugenots were killed and many others fled the country, some of them as refugees to the colonies of America.

Many splits have resulted from arguments over theological ideas - like who can be baptized and how do we do it - and over church governance - who has the power, who's in charge. Still others have split over ideas of morality, such as the abolition of slavery, whether women can be ordained, and whether LGBT folks can be baptized or ordained or married - basically whether or not they have a right to be. But the thing that probably keeps us divided today is the conflict over how we read and see the Bible.

Much blood - too much blood - has been spilled over the centuries and continues to be spilled today, literally and figuratively, because we can't agree on what our laws of being and thinking and behaving should say. Consider the death of Matthew Shepard and the venom spewed by the Westboro Baptist Church. But Jesus said - out of the hundreds of laws 'on the books' - the two most important are: Love God. Love people. Because God loves us.

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 we need it - 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 re-formed 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. After all, we can believe all the right things and still be mean.

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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 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 that God is moved by human pain and suffering, if we ourselves are untouched by the pain of others that we see 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 of justice and peace for the world?

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? It's not enough to love only the people in our own tribe - Western Christians, Reformers, Anglicans, Huguenots - name your group. We must love those in other tribes.

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!