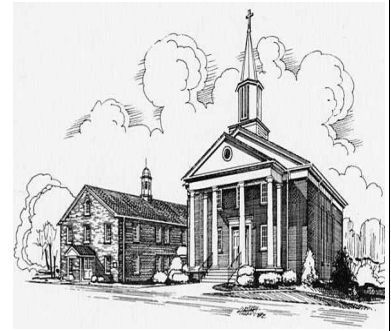


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to October 26

Year A
Proper 25
RCL



Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
Psalm 1
Matthew 22:34-46

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

Speak 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.

You 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. You 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.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You 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.

Psalm 1 Page 585, BCP

Beatus vir qui non abiit

- 1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!
- 2 Their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and they meditate on his law day and night.
- 3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;
everything they do shall prosper.
- 4 It is not so with the wicked;
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.
- 5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes,
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.
- 6 For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘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.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ‘The LORD said to my LORD, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’?”

If David thus calls him LORD, how can he be his son?” No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

SERMON

It's Reformation Sunday, the day we remember Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the church. It's a reminder that God still speaks to the current times. The Temple authorities in Jesus' time felt that their interpretation of Scripture and worship forms were God's last word. Jesus begged to differ. The Roman church in Luther's time felt the same. Luther begged to point out that God still had things to say. Can we still hear Him?

Tom once lent me a movie called "Joshua". I hadn't seen it because I never go to movies, but I know a lot of you are familiar with either the movie or the book it's based on. For those who haven't seen it, it relates the second coming of Jesus into a small town as an itinerant woodworker and the effect that His coming has on the people of the town. In the movie people sensed that there was something special about Joshua, that he was something of a miracle worker, but the thought that he was Jesus was really so far-fetched that it didn't cross the threshold of their consciousness. What might happen if a man dressed in contemporary, unremarkable clothes, and carrying a workman's kit arrived in Bellefonte like a thief in the night and began affecting people as Joshua did in the movie? If the second coming of Jesus is as quiet and subtle as was His first coming, will we know Him? Will the church, itself, recognize Him?

I think the answer most of us would have is that Scripture teaches that the second coming of Jesus will be heralded by considerable heavenly displays at the end of times, so we should have no trouble knowing Jesus. He'll be the one, like unto the Son of Man, coming in the clouds, trailing streams of glory. But what if God chooses to come otherwise? Then what? How shall we measure the Messiah?

In today's Gospel story, we get to look at this question through the lens of some of the clergy of Jesus' time. I know that all your life, you've heard this story told in a way

that makes the Pharisees out to be the bad guys, but I think we're being too hard on them. Jesus, Mr. Nobody from Galilee of the Gentiles with no degree and no role to play in the Temple, has made a scene, knocking over tables and making a great noise. What are people to think? It's entirely proper that the religious leaders of the time inquire who he thinks he is, and they do.

You see, the church exists to tell the story. Not just any story, but THE story, and it's right and proper for the priest or rabbi or minister to be there with a word of correction when needed if popular sentiment, or the culture of the time, tries to change the story in ways detrimental to it.

In early church writing, the church is often likened to a boat. Boats sail through water, but the church sails through culture. Inevitably, accretions from the time and the culture through which the church sails attach themselves to the bottom of the church's boat like barnacles. Some of those accretions are bad. They interfere with or distract the church from its job of telling the story.

But, some of the accretions are good additions to the story. It's the job of the priest or the rabbi or the minister to scrape the barnacles off our bottom from time to time, saving what is good, and removing those things that distract or interfere with the church's job of remembering and telling the story. But it's also necessary for the priest or rabbi or minister to recognize that God still speaks to us, sometimes perhaps through the voice of a teen aged Muslim girl as we saw last Sunday. His power to astonish is limitless and God is not bound or limited by any individual's reading of Scripture. We must measure God by God's own standards, not by our understanding.

The Pharisees, though, seemed to think that their understanding of Scripture IS God's last word. They tried to measure Jesus by how much He agreed with their understanding of Scripture. They seemed to think that God is powerless to move in ways not already

written in Scripture. The people in the streets had seen something in Jesus that moved and excited them. The Pharisees were testing him to see if he knew Scripture.

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

That’s the wrong question and the wrong way to measure the Messiah, even though their purpose was proper. Who is this guy? Does he know what he’s talking about, or is he just some random madman off the streets?

The question they posed, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” isn’t a very hard question. It’s a sort of Hebrew School 101 question, and Jesus gives them a good, solid Hebrew School 101 kind of answer, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18

He said to him, “‘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.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Score one for Jesus. He knows His Scriptures.

Jesus, to drive home the point, then asked them a harder Hebrew School question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?”

This was a uniquely tricky question. The Hebrew Scriptures had been interpreted by religious scholars for a millennium, resulting in an anticipation of who the Messiah was to be and what signs He would display. In their understanding, the Messiah was to be a man. Not the son of God, mind you. Just a man who would usher in the Messianic Age. And that man was to be of a specific family – the family of David. The Pharisees’ understanding was like the bumper sticker you sometimes see: “Scripture says it, I believe

it, and that ends it.” God could not act otherwise than in accordance with their understanding of Scripture. Consequently, they gave Jesus a Hebrew School 101 answer to His harder Hebrew School question:

They said to Him, “The son of David.”

By the understanding of the time, which was the measure they were trying to apply to Jesus, the answer is spot on. It was so well understood, that it was like a Catholic child reciting the catechism.

“Whose son is the Messiah?”

“The Messiah is the son of David.”

Jesus, however, is trying to teach them what we forget all the time: God’s scope of activity is greater than human understanding. Jesus quoted Psalm 110.

He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him LORD, saying,
‘The LORD said to my LORD,
Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet’?
If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”

In other words, if God says to the Messiah [David’s LORD], “Sit at my right hand”, how can we say the Messiah is David’s son, because David acknowledges the Messiah as his LORD? Jesus has just shot down one of the most important signs of the coming Messiah – that he would be of the house of David. He did a good job of it, too, because Matthew tells us that:

No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

The religious authorities have made themselves look ridiculous by focusing on what they think they know about God, instead of opening their eyes to behold God before them.

Now, why would I go to so much trouble to bring this up? It all happened a very long time ago, to people who understood life and their relationship with God in a radically different way than we do. I suppose it might be of historical interest, but what does it have to do with us?

I watched a young seminary graduate deliver his ordination sermon before Presbytery once. I don't recall the young man's name, but the burden of his message was that God speaks to all of us, sometimes in languages that others find hard to understand, but that God offers everyone a path to Him. That ran counter to the understanding of a number of the older members of Presbytery who felt that none come to the Father but through the Son. The young man's ordination went through but there were a number of adamant no votes. His message did not agree with their understanding and if he did not agree with their understanding then they felt he shouldn't be ordained.

I wonder if this is what was going on in Jesus' meeting with the religious authorities in the Temple so long ago? As clergy, it is my job to tell you THE story. In the words of Institution during celebration of Communion, I use ancient words of Paul, "I give to you as it was given to me..." But I now wonder if the heavy hand of the past has so de-sensitized me to the Gospel of Jesus Christ that, like the people who met with Him at the Temple, I wouldn't recognize Him when he comes again.

What is the proper way to measure the Messiah, church? We don't want to be taken in by just anybody who presents himself as the Messiah. We want to follow THE story, not just ANY story. How may we know when the true Gospel is spoken to us? Do we have to depend on a group of professional explainers in order to experience God's Spirit in our lives?

God has given us precise instructions:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

“Speak 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.
You 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.
You 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.
You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin you shall reprove your
neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.
You 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.

Jesus expands upon these commandments:

“‘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.’
Upon these two commandments hang all of the law and the prophets.”

Anything said to you, anyone urging that your faith demands of you anything con-
trary to these teachings, no matter how persuasively argued, is not urging upon you the
Good News of Jesus Christ.

Will you listen, church? Will you?

AMEN

BENEDICTION

“Benediction” means “good word” I have no better word than this quote from my
friend, the Reverend Dr. Lon Oliver:

Maybe this is why our great teachers have kept it simple:

**Hindus, “This is the sum of duty; do naught onto others what you
would not have them do unto you.”**

**In Judaism, “Show neither partiality to the weak nor deference to the
mighty, but judge your neighbor justly. ...You shall love your neighbor**

as yourself. I am the LORD.”

In Buddhism“...a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?”

In Confucianism, “Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence.”

Islam, Sikhs, etc., all offer they same admonition. In telling us to “love our neighbor,” Jesus was simply repeating what he would have been taught from birth. Truth telling and concern for our neighbor, is what seems to be missing in our culture these days and must be at the heart of any “responsible” philosophy.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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