

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

**Proper 25
Year A
RCL**



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

The Collect

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.

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

California is on fire. Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are under water. Houston is all but blown away. Our friend with the bad haircut in North Korea is threatening to touch off Armageddon for no readily discernible reason. Our own president changes his position six times before lunch and says awful things. Even the most well-balanced Christian has to admit, even if only for an instant, that the headlines sound an awful lot like the events which many have speculated will introduce the End Times. In my worse moments, I get the sense that all of Creation is winding up, like a major league pitcher, to deliver a fast ball. I don't like that chain of thought. It frightens me. Where do I look for comfort?

The answer, of course, is that I look to THE Story which the church exists to tell. Not just any story, but THE Story. Finding THE Story in the midst of all the noise is the challenge, and it's not a trivial challenge. It has always been that way, even (and perhaps especially) during Jesus' time on earth. It is the job of the church to teach only THE Story, so 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.

But it's also right and proper for the priest or rabbi or minister to recognize that God is not bound by human interpretations of His Scriptures. The challenge the Pharisees and Sadducees faced in Jesus' time was, "Is this stranger from Nazareth teaching THE Story, or some adulterated version? For people of our time, the question is, "If the second coming of Jesus is as quiet and subtle as was His first coming, will we recognize Him any better than did the religious people of His time?"

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 you are accustomed to view the Pharisees as the bad guys, but as I often say, I think we're too hard on them. Jesus, Mr. Nobody from Galilee of the Gentiles, with no degree, and no role to play in the Temple, has come out

of nowhere and made a scene, knocking over tables and making a great noise. It's entirely proper that the religious leaders of the time inquire who he thinks he is, and they do. That's what I'd do if someone came in here, knocked over the furniture and demanded to preach the sermon. I'd want to know if he knew what he was talking about.

The people in the streets were proclaiming Jesus as a prophet. They had seen something in Jesus that moved them – that excited them. The religious leaders of the time needed to convince themselves that Jesus wasn't a random madman, so they undertook to test Him. Their mistake was that they tested Him on how much He agreed with their understanding. That's the wrong question. People being people, we tend to overestimate our understanding of the subtle working of God throughout His creation.

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.

Why is it always a lawyer? Anyway, 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.'

But, then Jesus offered a commentary,

"On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Score one for Jesus. Jesus then asked them a Hebrew School 101 question:

"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?"

This is 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. That’s what Scripture said, and in their view, that ended 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 Hebrew School 101 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, their answer is spot on. 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?”

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:

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

I think this is the point of the whole discussion. 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. The people in the streets weren’t having that difficulty.

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?

As clergy, it is my job to tell you THE Story. In the words of Institution during cele-

bration of Communion, I tell you, “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 and the people of this age to the Gospel of Jesus Christ that, like the people who met with Him at the Temple, we won’t recognize Him when he comes again. We want to follow THE Story, not just ANY story. I wonder if our culture has blurred THE 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? Jesus has our answer for us. It is found in the two greatest 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 hatred of anyone, is not urging upon you the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

The Holy Scriptures must live **with** us or they will be no use **to** us. Keeping THE Story is the job of the church. 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. It's the job of the priest or the rabbi or the minister, from time to time, to scrape the barnacles off our bottom, saving what is good, and removing those things that distract or interfere with the church's job of remembering and telling THE Story.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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

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