

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner  
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church  
21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Year A/Proper 25  
October 29, 2017  
Text: Matthew 22:34-46

### “Living the Great Command”

There are commandments that we all live by. Many of us learned *the* Ten Commandments as children. You shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself an idol; you shall not use the Lord's name in vain, and so on. When it came to school our teachers had their own sets of commandments. You shall not put your hands on any other student; you shall raise your hand in class and not blurt out the answers; you shall not do your math homework using a pen, pencil only, please. There were the commandments our parents drilled into us so that even today they are etched in our memories. You shall not chew with your mouth open; say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’; do not hit your brother in the head; you shall come when I call you-don't let me have to call you again; you shall not speak to strangers, etc., etc., etc. Then some of us as teens turned the table on our parents-you shall not kiss me in front of my friends; you shall not tap your foot or bob your head to the music because someone might see you. And I am sure we can all think of other things too. Ah, commandments to live by!

We may lay down our rules or commandments, but even they should hang on the rule of love. At least this is what Jesus teaches. And don't ever try to outsmart Jesus because you won't win. It took the Pharisees and the other religious leaders long enough to figure that out.

For several Sundays now we have been hearing about Jesus' encounters with them in the Temple. These encounters would not have been out of the ordinary if they had been the usual philosophical and theological discussions that religious leaders especially rabbis were infamously known for. Instead, the chief priests, Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees had all sought to denounce him, to trip him up, test him. But that didn't work as Jesus kept astounding his listeners with his teaching.

Today, a lawyer from among the Pharisees came forward and asked him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

First of all, they must have forgotten that Jesus knew the Torah and the Laws. All 613 of them! He replied, not by giving them a long and complex answer. Instead he quoted the Hebrew Scriptures as found in the Books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind (Deut. 6: 4-5).’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18).’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Love. The greatest of commandment of all is to love God and our neighbor. Love is at the very core of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Love isn’t just a good idea but it is the law of God. “God’s Law is the law of love” (Pastor Delman Coates). No ifs, ands, or buts about it if we call ourselves followers of Christ.

But how are we to make sense of this? Love is hardly a law in the usual sense of the word because no one can legislate love or impose it upon others from the outside. In the Broadway musical/movie *Dreamgirls*, Effie White, the real talent of the girl group the Dreams, finds herself trying to persuade her two-timing manager and lover Curtis that he was going to love her no matter what. He was not about to leave her behind. So she sings the powerful song, “And I Am Telling You”. She tells him,

“I’m not living’ without you  
Not livin’ without you  
I don’t wanna be free  
I’m stayin’, I’m stayin’  
And you, and you, and you  
You’re gonna love me  
You’re gonna love me

But love doesn’t work that way, does it? Genuine love come from within. It comes from experiencing something that is greater than ourselves like the extravagant love that first comes from God.

Theologian and mystic Thomas Merton once wrote: “Who am I? My deepest realization of who I am is-I am the one loved by Christ...The depth of my identity is the center of my being where I am known by God.” And this is our identity-understanding and knowing that we are loved by God. We are God’s beloved. And as God’s beloved, we are to reciprocate God’s

love back to God with all of our beingness, our very essence—from the crowns of our heads to the soles of our feet; with every fiber of our being. In other words *“with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.”* And with that comes learning to love ourselves as God loves us.

Sometimes as individuals we don't do a very good job in loving ourselves. It is easy enough to name our shortcomings and forget that we are each *“fearfully and wonderfully made”* (Ps. 139:14) by our God. But when we understand how much we are loved, a response flows from us and Jesus tells us so because he links loving God with loving our neighbor. Loving our neighbor with not just the sweet, sentimental, emotional aspects of love but with the kind of love that binds and commits us one to the other. This was part of his prayer to his Father before his passion and death *“that they might become one, even as you and I are one”* (John 17:22b).

Listen again to what Jesus said, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* Loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is at once simple, complex, and demanding. And the way we go about it will manifest differently for each of us whether we are reflecting on our relationships, discerning our stewardship or looking into the face of a friend or a stranger.

About two weeks ago I stopped to pick up something at Walgreens. There was a person being waited on in the checkout line and another gentleman was approaching two steps ahead of me. I realized that there was something else I meant to check on and not finding it, I quickly headed back to the cashier. There must have been a snafu at the register because the scene was just as I had left it. The gentleman turned and seeing that I still had one single item, beckoned me to go on ahead of him. I smiled and said, ‘You go ahead. I’m in no hurry.’ He paid for his items and was headed toward the door when he turned on his heels, pulled out some bills, and told the cashier that he was paying for my purchase. When I tried to politely decline his offer he quietly remarked, “There is enough chaos in the world right now. Let me show you a little love today.” I truly felt God’s love in that moment.

Yes, when we understand that we are loved by God, a response is invoked in us and that is love paid forward. The love of Christ compels us. And they will know that we are Christians by our love.

“We are redeemed by love, and we are to be known for our love of others. Love for those near us, and those far; those like us, and those alien to us; those who we like, and those who we have a hard time stomaching; those who are nice to us, and those who have injured us greatly; those who think like us, vote like us, pray like us, and those who work for the very opposite things.”\*\*

Love of God requires something of us and from us. How will you show others the love of God today? Amen.

\*“And I Am Telling You” written by Henry Krieger and Tom Eyen

\*\**’Growing Edge’*, a reflection on Matthew 22:34-46 by Rick Morley