

11-03-24 Worship Service

Morning Prayer

Gracious and patient God, we come to you in prayer, grateful and humble. We're grateful for the rain that has come, for the ways it renews and nurtures the earth. We're grateful for healing and wellness that's been restored for those of us who've been ill or have had medical procedures. We're grateful for people and facilities that provide care when we need it – for doctors and counselors, for hospitals and retirement homes. And we're humbled when we consider your steadfast love for us. We're humbled when we think about how much we take for granted with so much of everything we need available to us so readily.

We want to live in your Spirit of abundance and generosity, God. Help us to give where there are needs, to share and live with open hearts and willing hands. Guide us by your Spirit to live with grace and without fear. Give us courage and strength to be your hands and feet in the world.

God of Life and Love, we thank you for the birth of Zara Joanna to Zane and Joy Unrau. Bless them as they become a family with the love and support of their extended families.

We continue to hold Steve and Sandy in our prayers God as they travel this morning to Phoenix where Steve will undergo tests and have the opportunity to meet with his Dr. there at the Mayo Clinic. Grant them safe travels and hear our prayers for the medical team there that they would put their best knowledge and education and experience to Steve's well-being.

God of the ages, of all history and of all that is to come, help us to remember that our faith is in you. Our hope is in you. We pray for this country, for its leaders and those whose decisions impact people far beyond themselves. We pray for your Peace to prevail as elections are held on Tuesday and for the days after as ballots are counted and tensions may be high. We pray for your Spirit of Love and Compassion to be felt through your people – across the street and around the world. We pray for your children who are living in the midst of war, starvation, drought or fear. Grant them your mercy and your comfort. Bless those who are in those places to help, to bring aid, food, water. Give them stamina and courage.

Be with us now as this time of worship continues. Renew our minds and spirits so that we might reflect your Love into the world more clearly. We pray in the name of Jesus our example and our redeemer. Amen.

2024-11-03 - Message

The GOAT Commandments

Pastor Lois Harder

Maybe I should just make my apologies right off the bat for the cheesy sermon title. I was told that some would think it's silly, some might get a kick out of it and some wouldn't get it at all. All three responses are absolutely acceptable and for those who don't get it, let me explain that I only recently learned this term GOAT. In the sports world, it stands for Greatest Of All Time.

So, for instance, Tom Brady is the GOAT of the NFL. In the NBA I've read that the GOAT is a toss-up between Michael Jordan and LaBron James. In the Women's NBA it's Diana Taurasi (Tah-RAH-see) and in Tennis the GOAT currently is Novak Djokovic.

So when I read these very familiar verses again, it was with this newly acquired term in mind and I was so pleased with myself to recognize it in these Biblical passages and be like, "Oh, that's cool! This scribe was asking about the GOAT commandment!" Okay... honestly, this is how many people who preach run around in life – hearing news and stories and learning new terms and all the while we've got these Biblical ideas running around in our heads and sometimes (if we're paying attention) they connect! In weird ways perhaps, but still!?

It shouldn't come as any surprise that each of the four Gospels includes this scenario with Jesus proclaiming the Greatest Commandment. It's interesting that THE Greatest Commandment actually ends up containing two commandments, but they're inseparable, rolled into one.

Every Jewish person knew (and knows) this central and all-important commandment from Deuteronomy. It was given to Moses to teach to the people just as they were preparing to enter their new homeland after having been redeemed from enslavement to the Pharaoh in Egypt and then wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years. It was the commandment on which their success and prosperity depended. It was part of the covenant that God made with the people through Moses and it follows on the heels of the Ten Commandments. The instructions were to "Keep God's decrees and commandments... SO THAT YOUR DAYS MAY BE LONG and observe them diligently SO THAT IT MAY GO WELL WITH YOU..." Here again, we see this sort of conditional "if/then" understanding found in the Jewish tradition – IF you keep God's commandments, THEN your days will be long and IF you practice and do them, THEN it may go well with you.

Deuteronomy 6, verse 5 is known as The Shema. Shema means HEAR! Or LISTEN! It's as if God is saying, "Listen! After all we've been through together here's what I need you to do..." Let's say it again, together (*Delton – on the screen*) "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Undivided allegiance to Yahweh. Undivided devotion. No other gods. This is not the warm and fuzzy "feeling" of love. This is heart, soul and might. It involves ALL of one's faculties and abilities. It means that every decision that is made is based on this commitment.

But how can God command such a thing? Love can't be coerced or demanded. How is it even possible for humans to love this way? We're so fickle! The writer of Deuteronomy knew that people are shaped by training, habits, practices and education. We are shaped by what we hear and read and discuss and what we do. And so we have the instructions to keep these words in our hearts, to recite them to our children and talk about them, to put them on our hands and affix them to our foreheads and write them on the doorposts of our houses and gates.

If you've ever seen observant (Orthodox) Jewish men, during their weekday morning prayers, they wear small, leather boxes called tefilin or phylacteries, one on their arm and one on their forehead, strapped on with leather straps. In these boxes are various Torah verses written on tiny parchment scrolls. Jewish families also will have something called a mezuzah, a small leather

box fastened to their doorposts. And in the mezuzah is a small piece of parchment on which is written the Shema. They'll kiss their fingers and then touch the mezuzah each time they go in or out of their house. It's a constant reminder which then becomes a focus. These are very literal, concrete practices and habits that some would see as ritualistic and maybe would say become meaningless with repetition. But they're also patterns, disciplines, ways to learn how to focus on devotion to God. They're ways to nurture a relationship with God and learn how to allow ourselves to be loved by God with this fierce heart/soul/might kind of love. It's intense! But the writer of Deuteronomy believed that obedience in love is a response to being loved. I wonder what kinds of practices WE might do to help us gain this kind of focus? If any of you have ideas about that, I'd love to hear them. Maybe they would be the kinds of things that we could suggest practicing together, say, during the season of Advent or Lent.

So... in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) it's not surprising that in each telling of this story it's people who are specialists in the Torah, the Jewish Law, that are questioning Jesus about this Greatest Commandment. As I said, Jewish people then and now know this commandment. And because of this interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees or scribes or whoever it happened to be, Christians know this commandment as well. In Matthew, it says that the Pharisees were "testing" Jesus. In Luke, we read that the questioner was trying to "test" or "trick" Jesus. In John we find Jesus with his disciples at the last supper. He had just washed their feet and then told them, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

In this morning's story from Mark, the scribe who came to question Jesus seems sincere. There's no indication from the text that he was trying to test or trick Jesus, but he was asking a genuine, academic question. This was unusual and takes us by surprise. Because in the chapter just before this, chapter 11 the chief priests, the scribes and the elders ALL came to Jesus in the temple questioning his authority and trying to trap him. Then in chapter 12, verses 13-15 the Pharisees and Herodians were trying to deceive him with false respect calling him "Teacher" but asking him a trick question about paying taxes. Jesus wisely advised, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." They were utterly amazed. Finally, JUST before our story some Sadducees came to ask him a trick question about the resurrection. The Sadducees were part of the religious establishment who did not believe in resurrection, or life after death... and this is why they were Sad-you-see. That's how you can remember that. And Jesus handily used their own flawed understandings to expose their ignorance of the scriptures and of God's power.

So Jesus was very much "on his game" and responding to these powerful folks with his sharpest "debate" skills. He knew they were working hard with bad intentions to back him into a very dangerous corner. Now presumably this scribe had watched all of this happen because it says, "One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another." It seems that the scribe must've been impressed with Jesus' responses and scriptural interpretations – even though he may not have agreed. But he was interested and apparently not intimidated or threatened by Jesus but rather drawn into a conversation with him.

The scribe and Jesus were equal as theological debate partners and they clearly had respect for one another. In this otherwise heated and slippery scenario, these two found themselves having a

respectful exchange, rising above the divides and engaging in a genuine conversation that had an overtone of redemption to it. The scribe asked a straightforward and honest question that Jesus understood as an invitation to a discussion, “Which commandment is first?” The word could also be translated as greatest or the most central or essential. Jesus’ response is unguarded and direct; he quoted the text that everyone knew and was, undoubtedly the singular answer to the question. “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul...” and then he added, “and with all your mind and with all your strength – or might.” And without missing a beat he went right on... “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Do you see what Jesus did there? He first of all added the mind to the ways we are to love God and then slick as a whistle incorporated the love of neighbor into the GOAT commandment. Greatest Of All Time. And the scribe agreed and acknowledged, “You are right.” And then in good, therapeutic listening fashion, he repeated back to Jesus what he had said. “God is one, and besides him there is no other; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself’ – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Not only did he agree with Jesus, he even conceded that this commandment to LOVE is more important than the rituals, the sacrifices, the ways we’ve always done things. This is a NEW commandment and it’s the most important thing for us to do. Those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus, people of The Way, those who’ve committed to entering into God’s covenant... Love God. Love your neighbor. And John adds, Love one another. No more questions.

On this election-eve weekend when our senses have been nearly completely overtaken with people hurling insults, yelling demands, degrading and disregarding one another, engaging in name-calling and even death threats. When the future of our country seems to hang in the balance of who has the most money and who can steal or gerrymander the most votes, it seems like a necessary coincidence that this familiar text “happens” to be what was in the lectionary for today. Such a timely and important message for us. Whatever happens on Tuesday and in the days beyond, we follow Jesus. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love one another. There’s no other commandment greater than these. Amen.

Prayer of Dedication

For all that you have entrusted to us, O Lord, we give you thanks. We return a portion of that as a token of our love. May we honor you with all of our resources.

Benediction

Go into the world with the intention of living out the greatest commandments. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love one another. Amen.