



ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH - DELRAY BEACH, FLORIDA

24 Pentecost - Proper 25 - October 25/26, 2008 - Year A

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Ps. 90:1-6,13 -17; Matthew 22:34-36

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

The Most Important Thing!

As many of you know, Susan and I just returned from a 7 day Disney cruise to the Western Caribbean. We traveled with our daughter Kerry, her husband Kevin and our 4 year old granddaughter Emily, which of course made Disney the cruise line of choice. Our 22 year old son Richard was also on the trip, as were Kevin's parents, which made this a real family adventure. We had a wonderful and relaxing time and are very grateful that we had this opportunity.

The weather cooperated, more or less, though we were in rough seas a few times. Fortunately, this didn't bother any of us. A front off of Honduras threatened to turn tropical and it affected the entire area where we were from the Grand Caymans to Cozumel. Throughout the cruise we were under clouds and it did rain a few times.

Nevertheless, we had two good beach days; a visit to the Mayan ruins on Cozumel (they were interesting, but the mosquitoes were brutal!) and there were some nice, though breezy times, on deck. Especially noteworthy was a blow out "Pirates of the Caribbean" party that included fireworks off the ship. We were pampered all week and ate lots and rested and feel renewed.

It should be noted, however, that although we were away from the daily routines, we were not totally out of touch. Thanks to satellite technology, the Disney Magic allowed us to keep up with things going on in the world.

The televisions in our state rooms received CNN and FOX and ESPN. So we watched the Tampa Bay Rays defeat the Boston Red Sox for the American League championship. We also watched games one and two of the World Series. We have kept up with the financial markets and also the ups and downs of Sarah Palin and Joe Biden, of John McCain, Barak Obama and "Joe the Plumber."

Over and over, a question keeps emerging for the candidates: What's the most important issue or concern? Is it the war in Iraq and national security? Is it the economy? Pro-life or pro-choice? Tax cuts or no tax cuts? Is it health care, or the character of your opponent, or his or her experience, or their capacity for leadership? "Tell us," the press and the people ask of each of the candidates, "what's most important?"

How the candidates respond to this tells us a lot about them. It lets us know of their ability to read the current situation in the nation and in the world. It also gives us some insight into their priorities. "Tell us," we ask again and again, testing the candidates, "what's most important?"

That's what was going on in today's Gospel reading from Matthew. Jesus was being tested. He was being tested over and over again. He was being tested by his opponents. He is embroiled in a series of controversies with them: scribes, Pharisees, Herodians. They have been coming at him with rapid fire questions: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? (Matthew 22:17). Is there a resurrection of the dead? (Matthew 22:23-27). And now this, a question asked

by a lawyer of the Pharisees, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Matthew 22:36). *Tell us, what do you think is most important?*

The lawyer is not a lawyer the way we think of lawyers today. He was a scribe. One who was capable of reading and writing and who had particular competence in interpreting the Jewish Law - the Torah.

When the lawyer tested Jesus by asking which commandment of the law was the greatest, he was referring not just to the Ten Commandments, but to the whole of the Jewish law; all of the commandments found in the Torah - all 613 of them! In answering the lawyer and his testing, Jesus is also responding to the spirit of legalism which is dominant in the Judaism expressed by the religious authorities.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus contends with the authorities about their application of the law. For too many, the Torah, observing Jewish Law became an end in and of itself. It was law for law's sake rather than law for God's sake.

In his response to that lawyer, Jesus got to the heart of the matter. Today, we call Jesus' response to the lawyer, “the Summary of the Law.” *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 the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets....*” (Matthew 22:37-38).

Jesus joins a command to love God from Deuteronomy (6:5) with another command to love neighbor from Leviticus (19:18). It's all about love, Jesus says: Love of God; love of neighbor; love of self. And the three are intertwined. You cannot have one, or do one, without doing the others. One cannot, for example, love God, while hating one's neighbor.

As the First Letter of John states so well, “Those who say ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love a God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20). Conversely, one cannot love a brother or sister fully, without loving God first, for love is of God. God is love's source (1 John 4:16).

The word “love” has been cheapened in our world. It is overused and misunderstood. As one biblical scholar, writing on today's passage from Matthew has written, “In an age when the word “love” is greatly abused, it is important to remember that the primary component of biblical love is not affection, but commitment. Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we consider all that God has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that Duet. 6:5 demands of us but rather stubborn, unwavering commitment. Similarly, to love our neighbor, including our enemies, does not mean that we must feel affection for them. To love the neighbor is to imitate God by taking their needs seriously....”¹

Do you remember what it says in the Epistle of James? It says, “*If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead*” (James 2:15-17).

Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, “To the Christian love is the works of love. To say that love is a feeling or anything of the kind is an un-Christian conception of love. That is the aesthetic definition and therefore fits the erotic and everything of that nature. But to the Christian love is the works of love. Christ's love was not an inner feeling, a full heart and what not, it was the work of love which was his life.”²

It is the work of love which is to be our lives as Christ's followers. It strikes me that we need to remember this today, and especially as we approach our general election in this country.

How much rancor and animosity our elections generate. How much we are polarized from one another. It is sinful.

As we move into the last few days of this election, I hope and pray that we will allow Christ's Summary of the Law to reverberate in our hearts and minds: *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 the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets....*"

It is Jesus' statement about that which is most important: Love of God; Love of neighbor; Love of self - all three. All three together, not in isolation one from the other. None compartmentalized, as though we could love God and not love our neighbor, or love ourselves at the expense of our neighbors.

To be sure, we will not always agree with what best represents our loving response to our neighbor, or how best to take our neighbor's needs seriously and responsively. It is in our disagreements, perhaps, more than any other way, that we need to keep the love command in front of us, *for how we are with each other in our disagreements is the clearest measure of how loving we are.* It requires of us both discipline and grace.

Without doubt, Desmond Tutu is one of the saints of our times, and we can take some pride that he is an Anglican. As much as anyone I can think of, Desmond Tutu exemplifies the capacity of a person to allow grace and discipline to shape how to love, often in the face of fierce anger and persecution.

Desmond Tutu was Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa in the days of Apartheid. No matter the oppression that was visited upon him and his people, Desmond Tutu refused to hate and insisted on the way of love. As with Martin Luther King, Jr. in our own country, Desmond Tutu felt strongly that the humanity of his oppressors was compromised by the evil in which they participated, and so his work of liberation was not merely black liberation, it was for the whites of South Africa as well.

In his wonderful little book, *God has a Dream*, Desmond Tutu encourages us each see ourselves as "centers of love."³ He takes note that good psychological theory suggests that when one begins to act lovingly, we begin to feel love. It's a variation of the adage, "fake it 'til you make it."

As Tutu notes, "If you act long enough in a particular way, you begin to feel the feelings that accompany the actions. We don't always feel like we are all God's children. At first we simply accept this truth cerebrally and then begin to say, 'This is my brother; this is my sister.' But when we begin to act with awareness, increasingly feelings come, too"⁴ Tutu continues, "If more of us could serve as centers of love and oases of peace, we might just be able to turn around a great deal of the conflict, the hatred, the jealousy and the violence. This is a way that we can take on the suffering and transform it. Let us watch our tongues. We can so easily hurt one another. Our harsh words can extinguish a weak, flickering light. It is far too easy to discourage, all too easy to criticize, to complain, to rebuke. Let us try instead to see even a small amount of good in a person and concentrate on that. Let us be quicker to praise than to find fault. Let us be quicker to thank others than to complain. Let us be gentle with God's children."⁵

"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 the second is like it: You

shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets....”

Jesus considered these the most important commandments of all and he lived his life by them? How about us? How about you? What do you believe is most important? How well does your life reflect this belief?

1. Hare, Douglas *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching - Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, 260.

2. See <http://www.worldofquotes.com/author/S!oslash;ren-Kierkegaard/1/index.html>

3. Tutu, Desmond *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York, London, etc: Doubleday Press, 2004),79

5. Tutu, 79