

Homily for Proper 25A
Oct 25, 2020
S. Stephen's, Providence

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, today, we finally arrive at the end of this question and answer
showdown between Jesus and the Pharisees
that has occupied our Sunday lectionary for some weeks now.
Each time Jesus has proved himself more clever and more capable than they are.
In our Gospel reading this morning,
we hear words very familiar to us, as we hear them nearly every week
at the beginning of our liturgy: 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 first and great commandment.
And the second is like unto it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.
On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.
In other words,
the entirety of the teaching contained in the Law of Moses
and the writings of the prophets can be summed up as,
“Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.”
This had been summarized by other rabbis before Jesus's time,

and frankly,

using love of God and love of neighbor as a way to interpret scripture,

or as a lens through which to read it,

is a very useful thing.

There is nothing complicated or controversial about the commandment

to love God and to love our neighbor.

However, for all its remarkable beauty and sophistication,

the English language perhaps fails us slightly in this moment,

because the word love here perhaps suffers from misunderstanding and overuse.

I love football.

I love the opera.

I love watching that one TV show.

I love you.

I love my mother.

I love my husband.

I love chocolate.

I love key lime pie.

I love to cook.

I love dogs.

I love God.

You see where I am going, yes?

Whereas the New Testament employs several different words we translate as love, we are stuck with our rather flat, cliché notion of what the word love means.

We tend to think of it as an ordering of priorities,

or a preference,

or a charged feeling of emotion.

The Greek word eros refers to the heightened passion of desire,

which we might rightly use to describe our romantic attraction to someone.

Then there's the word philia, which describes brotherly love – that one is passionless.

And the word most used for love – agape – is likewise passionless:

it might best be rendered loving kindness.

It is an act – it is something one does. It is full of mercy and compassion.

Biblical love is not passive – it is an active thing, begun in God,

and continued in us.

God loves Israel, and so he teaches Israel to love him, and to love each other.

This is the kind of love that is implied

when we are told to love God with all our heart and soul and mind.

It is not a matter of preferring God over other things,

or devoting our full height of emotion and affection towards God:

rather it is the orienting of our being towards God's loving kindness,

which then in turn makes us ready to enact loving kindness toward others.

It would be far easier to assent to the first two ways of loving God:
with our more modern connotation of what it means to love,
it is easy to think to one self, I will love God with all that I am.
But if it is simply a state of mind, or a stated preference,
much as I might say I love pistachio gelato,
or I love the New England Patriots,
again, we're not really understanding what God wants of us when we love God.

To love God is not to have a feeling,
but to make a choice.

To love God is to reflect the love that we have received from him –
and so we exhibit generosity and patience,
compassion and mercy.

If you think that sounds easy, fine.

And it can be, when we encounter only those we love –
ahh, there it is again. What do I mean when I say that?

Maybe I should have said – those who I agree with, and want to spend time with.

It is easy to love those who look like me, or think like me,
or don't challenge me.

It is far more difficult to actively love one's enemies,
which is also a commandment from Jesus.

There is no asterisk or footnote next to the word neighbor in our scriptures:

it's everyone.

Furthermore, elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus literally says "love your enemies."

It's hard work, folks.

No one ever said it would be easy.

But you belong to a higher calling – you are a part of a vision for the world,
which is God's vision for the world.

As the Lord spoke to Moses, You shall be holy,
for I the Lord your God am holy.

It is a wonderful calling to which you and I are summoned.

Sadly, the world at large does not hear this call to love of neighbor enough:
we see in the news and in our country what happens
when we refuse to love our neighbor, or our perceived enemies.

The overarching witness of Judeo-Christian teaching and ethics
seems to be slipping away from our public life.

Perhaps that's an overstatement – but the kind of loving kindness we are called to
is not celebrated and lifted up nearly enough.

So go and change that.

Be living examples of agape – God's loving kindness.

Choose to be that witness in the world –

God's hands and feet.

Choose to enact loving kindness –
choose to embody patience and generosity.

It changes the world around you,
and when enough of us are doing it together,
it begins to change the whole world.

And what a thing that would be –
the whole world united in love of God and love of neighbor –
heart, soul, and mind.

Amen.