

***Trinity XVIII Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins***

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Which commandment is the first of all?

The question comes most often from the elderly, those who have in some measure completed much of the business of life: their careers are over, their children are grown, their mortgages are paid, and much of their work and influence at home, church and community has begun to wane. But the question is also asked with poignancy, by those who have had serious strokes, those who feel they can no longer contribute. Why am I still here? In other words, what is the purpose of life, my life? What is it all about? There are a variety of ways in which that question is asked. In our Gospel, it comes in a typically Jewish form: “Which commandment is the first of all?”

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Jesus has just been asked a variety of questions, from competing and polarized groups, who gang up on him to try and trap him in his speech and responses. So they ask about whether one should pay taxes to the heathen - cruel and oppressive, occupying Caesar. They try to get him to side either with the anti-tax Pharisees or the pro-tax Herodians. He eludes their snare and says, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Next come the Sadducees, who ask that ridiculous question about life after physical death, a reality they denied. He tells them, “The Lord God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.”

Finally, this scribe comes up and asks for Jesus’ opinion. In this context, it seems that the scribe’s question in our Gospel is an attempt to get Jesus to choose one option or competing principle.

There is a “divide and conquer” strategy at work against Jesus here, which he himself overturns, refusing even to allow the division of the love of God and neighbour.

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That, then, is the context of our Gospel reading for this morning. The question is: “Which is the first commandment?” Now you will remember, along with your children, that the first of the ten is this: I am the Lord thy God, Thou shalt have none other gods before me. The Lord our God, the Lord is one. In the first four of the ten commandments, we are taught to love the Lord with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. These four commandments correspond exactly to loving the one and only God with all our heart, the God who is no idol with all our soul, the God who reveals himself and his Name to us with all our mind, and loving him with all our strength in six days of work and one day of rest and recreation. The next six of the ten commandments relate our duty to love our neighbour, including everyone from our parents, to the check-out clerk, and the kid who mows the lawn down the street.

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Neither the content nor the pattern of what we rightly call Jesus' summary of the law is novel. It is the same as the Ten Commandments themselves. In fact, the very words are from the "Shema" or "Hear O Israel," based on Deuteronomy 6.4-5 and Leviticus 19.18. The Hear O Israel, the first section of the summary, was something every Jewish male was to repeat every morning and night.

There are really three sections in that summary which we ought to note. First, there is the theological basis, next the command to love God with your all, and third the command to love your neighbour. Now notice how truth is prior to love, in Jesus' teaching. Knowledge of the Lord, who is the one and only God, precedes love of the Lord. Knowledge comes before love. You cannot love what you do not know, and you cannot love aright what you do not know aright. Right faith is a prerequisite to right love. And notice what kind of love this is. It is such as can be commanded, so it is an act of

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the will. But it involves not only our heart, but our soul and mind and strength. The commandment is simply to love God with our all. I hope, then, you can see the connection between these first two sections. Precisely because there is only one Lord God, and no other but he, we owe him everything - our undivided love, our all. This love of God, this love for God, is to be undivided undiminished, unique and exclusive.

Now the scribe asked Jesus for one commandment, but our Lord gave him two. He got more than he bargained for. It is the connection of these two commandments, the necessary connection and even identity of the two, which is new. The love of God and neighbour are connected by Christ and in Christ, in a brand new way. You see, there is a string here. You cannot have your heart right with the Lord, unless your mind is right with him first, and you cannot be right with the Lord unless you are right with your neighbour too.

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You cannot love your neighbour aright unless you know him truly, as the creature of God and beloved of the Lord, for whom Christ died. The love of neighbour, without the love of God, reveals itself to be something quite unprincipled, self-serving, dangerous and destructive. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep his commandments. And as well, another point emphasized by St. John, you cannot rightly love God unless that finds its expression in the love of neighbour. If a man says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar.

Having then faced the Herodians, Sadducees and Pharisees, Jesus poses a question to them in return. His argument to them is that the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah only make sense in terms of the twin natures of the Christ, both Son of David and David’s Lord. He is both the son of Man, human; and the son of God, divine.

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And here is where our Gospel text finds its final unity.

Remember that Jesus tells the scribe that he is not far from the kingdom of God, if he knows of the one Lord God and the duty to love him with your all, and your neighbour as yourself. He is not far from the kingdom, but not yet in it. I suspect that many of us here find ourselves in the same place. We acknowledge that there is one Lord God, and that we owe him our all, and that our good individually and collectively lies in good will. We are not far from the kingdom of God. We believe in one God Almighty.

But the Christian creed goes further. We are not merely theists. Such a position is the best of natural religion. But by it, one cannot enter the kingdom of God, without acknowledging and receiving the love and revelation of the Trinity, who comes to us in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Lord and Saviour, and in the Holy life-giving Spirit. For one enters only by knowing, by faith in that divine-human Saviour, Jesus the Son of God. Jesus' riddle is an invitation to that

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scribe and us, to decide about him. Who is he? Is he just a man, a good but deranged man with delusions of grandeur? Or is he our God, come in our human nature to reveal himself and save us?

In him, my friends, in him, my brothers and sisters (for it is in him that we are friends, in him that we are brothers and sisters, in him that we are neighbours with the whole of humanity), in him the love of God and neighbour find their ultimate unity. He is the perfect expression of that love. Think only of his cross, and see there the love of God, the giving of all his heart and soul and mind and strength, as well as the greatest love of neighbour. And more, Jesus is both our God and our neighbour, in him we know the unity of the love of God and neighbour. He is the perfect revelation of God and the perfect representative of humanity. In Jesus Christ, we come to know and believe the love that God has for us, and to love God. And in Jesus Christ, we have come to know the love of neighbour and to

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love our neighbour. And as well we need to add, that it is in Jesus Christ that we have come to love ourselves.

We love him because he first loved us, for the love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. And that love, both God's love for us and our love for God, is only in our hearts and minds through Jesus Christ, who died for us while we were yet sinners, and by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us, to whom with the Father, three persons, one God be all honour and glory and worship and praise and thanksgiving, here and everywhere, now and for ever. Amen.