

Remembering to do the right thing

Ex 22.21-27; Psalm 1; 1 Thess 2.1-8; Mt 22.34-36

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Pentecost 23 Year A October 27, 2002

Now, when the Pharisees heard that (Jesus) had silenced the Sadducees, they came together in one place. One of the (Pharisees) asked (Jesus) as a challenge: Teacher, which commandment of the Law is the most important? (Jesus) said to him: Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole person, and with your whole mind. This the first and most important commandment. But there is a second that is like it: Love your neighbour as you love yourself. The whole of the law and of the prophets depends on these two commandments. While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them: What is your thinking regarding the Anointed One, the Christ? Whose son is he? They said to him: The son of David. (Jesus) said to them: But, then, how does David, (inspired) by the spirit, call him Lord, when he says: The Lord said to my Lord: sit at my right until I put your enemies under your feet. If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son? No one was able to answer him in any way nor, from that day on, did anyone dare to ask him anything else.

How's your memory? Do you have difficulty remembering to do certain things? How about names?

What about when it comes to laws? Do you always remember all the laws that apply when you are driving? How about when you are filling out your income tax? What about your daily life: do you always remember what is involved in doing the right thing? Do you always remember to do the right thing?

That presupposes that you even know all the laws that are out there. But I find that I have difficulty not only REMEMBERING everything that I'm supposed to remember, but even KNOWING everything that I'm supposed to KNOW!

For example, I didn't know for a long time that in Ottawa you could turn left from a one-way street on to a one-way street. I saw people doing it and I thought they were just taking a short-cut. Someone going to North Carolina might not know that of the 100 counties in North Carolina you cannot swear in public in 98 of them, but that you can in 2 of them, nor might they know which 2 they are!

Or what about situations that arise that are not covered by any law? What about when you go out for a meal? What about at work? What about when you are getting on an airplane?

One way to cope with the abundance of laws is to just use your common sense and to work by rules of thumb. For example, for driving: go the speed limit, yield to the right, stay to the right

unless passing, etc. When you are filling out your income tax: don't cheat or lie! What about your daily life? Well, maybe the so-called golden rule: treat others the way you would want to be treated by them.

Israel was given 613 commandments by Moses. That's not too many, but of course, over time these were supplemented by other laws as need arose. Like us, Jewish people had to ask themselves what to do in specific circumstances and they were supposed to remember each of these laws. So, by the day of Jesus, there were a LOT Of laws in Israel.

Now, lets suppose that there were some Israelites who, like me, had a bad memory, and couldn't remember whether you were supposed to avoid red heifers altogether in your diet or eat only particular parts of the red heifer, or sacrifice the red heifer? The laws were that specific! And if you violated one: **zot!!**

Or what about situations that were not covered in the law. Lets say your sons second wife who is half-Jewish gives birth to a girl, who, when she grows up wants to marry a full-blooded Jewish boy: is she permitted to do so? These kinds of questions were one of the reasons for the rise of scribes and rabbis, people who could tell people what to do in individual situations.

But, one of the first things that the rabbis did was to decide on certain rules of thumb that would help the people guide themselves in their lives. Two of them that they settled on were the two commandments that Jesus enunciates in today's Gospel reading: Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole person, and with your whole mind and Love your neighbour as you love yourself. These are the two principles, or rules of thumb, that many of the rabbis, including Jesus, agreed were the rules to go by when you forgot a law or when you couldn't think which law applied in the situation in which you found yourself. On those occasions, as people do today when they ask themselves What Would Jesus Do, a Jewish person would say: I know that I am to love God completely and I know that I am to love my neighbour as much as I love myself.

Now, you will note that both of these commandments are about love. I have suggested to you before that you should not think of love, when it is mentioned in the Bible, as we do today, that is, as a romantic notion of hugs and kisses and warm feelings all over. The word love described something very different from that. What it means in the Bible is service. Women love their husbands (and not vice-versa) because they serve their husbands; slaves love their masters (and not vice-versa) because slaves serve their masters, and children love their parents (and not vice-versa) because they serve their parents. Of course, husbands and slave masters and parents have a responsibility to those under them, but it is not expressed as love.

So, a Jew would have understood very clearly what was required of him or her in every walk of life in order to fulfill Gods law and to stay safe with God: to serve God with my whole person (body, mind, and soul), just as a good and faithful wife would serve her husband, a slave his master, or an obedient child his or her parent. No matter what the situation, this is the kind of attitude that was to be evidenced.

And, a Jew would also have understood very clearly what was required of him or her in relation to other Jews who were neighbours: I am to serve them in the same way that I do things that

serve myself. I am to subordinate my desires and will for my neighbours goods and his beautiful wife, for example, and to honour him and his goods rather than taking them for myself, even though I want them. This had a profound influence on Jewish society and led to great stability and coherence.

And then Jesus appeared! The Son of David himself, with an authority that overwhelms his questioners and finally silences them because they might not know who he is, but they certainly know that he is not like anyone they have ever met before.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that Jesus upset the understanding that there were in fact two rules of thumb when it came to all the laws. Jesus in fact accepts the two great commandments as other rabbis did. (In fact, in one of the other Gospels, it is a Pharisaic rabbi who tells Jesus what the two great commandments were and Jesus commends him.)

But, what Jesus does do is to take these two commandments and give them new meaning in light of his whole ministry and teaching.

For example, with regard to the first commandment: throughout his ministry and teaching, Jesus revolutionized the understanding of what it meant to serve the Lord your God with your whole being as he showed that **serving God with all that you are was not like a slave serving a master, like a woman serving her husband, or like a child serving his parents. Serving God was modeled on Gods serving us.**

- Serving God meant for Jesus giving your all for God, in the same way that God gave his all for you!
- Serving God means willingly giving up whatever it takes to complete Gods work, in the same way that the Son of God gave up even his sonship to save us.
- Serving God means spending as much time thinking about God and what would please God as God spends thinking about our needs and what would please us.
- Serving God means being entirely trustworthy with the gifts and talents that God has given you and using them for the purpose that God has given them to you as much you trust God not to use his power and wisdom for evil designs and purposes, or to devise ways to hurt you.
- Serving God means being willing to die, not to please God, but in order to be the means whereby Gods purposes can be carried forth, in the same way that God was willing to die for us.

NOTE: not being willing to cause OTHERS to die, but being willing to die ones self. Sometimes that might mean physical death; sometimes that might mean social death, as you die to make the Lords name known in your work, in your school, among your friends who might ridicule you for serving God.

These were things that were completely unimaginable to the people of Jesus own day This was profoundly revolutionary

And that leads us to the second commandment, which Jesus says is like the first one: serving your neighbour as yourself means

- being willing to give up things for your neighbour,
- being trustworthy in whatever your neighbour entrusts to you, whether that be his wallet, his wife, or his children,
- even being willing to die for your neighbour.

Thus far all of Jesus rabbinic contemporaries would have agreed. But, who is my neighbour, Jesus was once asked by one of them. And here is where Jesus understanding of Gods purposes throughout the whole of history radically diverge from the understanding of his contemporaries: for the Jewish rabbis, as for people in most parts of the world, neighbour means one thing: people who live around me because they are just like me; they are family, they are of my clan. You know, the fact that neighbours in Canada or in the US, or even in some parts of Europe, are NOT immediate family, that they come from various parts of the world, that they don't even have the same skin colour as I do, or genetic codes, is incredibly rare. The vast majority of the worlds populations live surrounded by members of their own family, their own clan, their own tribe. To love your neighbour means to treat your family members with respect.

But, Jesus destroyed that traditional understanding of neighbour when he answered the rabbis question who is my neighbour with the story of the Good Samaritan. From that time on, it would be clear to the church that my neighbour is whomever I encounter on the road of life. ANYONE I encounter! Because ANYONE is an object of Gods love. And we are to serve anyone we encounter on the road of life as an object of Gods love, whom God is willing to serve, even to die for, by being willing ourselves to serve that person, even to die for him or her.

That means loving and serving the stranger and foreigner and enemy, as much as you love your own family. It means being willing to give up things for the stranger, being trustworthy with the goods of a foreigner, even being willing to die for an enemy. It also means that masters will now have to serve their slaves, husbands their wives, and parents their children. This is so obvious to us today, but it was so profoundly revolutionary in Jesus own day that we need to remind ourselves that this kind of language could get a person killed. And it did!

Now, in case you are wondering, I'm not naive. I do not expect everyone that we serve to turn around and thank us. Nor is what I have said here a prescription for nations to lay down their defences and their arms, as if that were service of others. I do think that many neighbours that we serve will turn around and take advantage of us, even kill us for our service of them. After all, That's what they did to Jesus for all of his good works. But, that didn't stop Jesus; it didn't stop God; and it shouldn't stop us who model our lives on the actions of our God on our behalf. God is not stupid nor should we be: what we are being asked to do as Christians is not to be naive in the face of our enemies but to serve all we encounter knowing that God can bring good out of evil, and can redeem even the worst sinner.

It's on this point of redemption that I want to conclude. All that I have said here is true: this IS what serving God meant for Jesus; this IS what serving your neighbour as yourself meant for Jesus. But, Jesus also looked at his followers and said: you're never going to be able to do this. You see, Jesus knew very well that these two commandments are not a kind of summary of the Law. Jesus did not say: If you simply live by these two principles, you will satisfy Gods

requirements as if it were possible ever to adequately love or serve God and adequately or perfectly love or serve our neighbour.

No, Jesus knew that even his most devout followers were too self-interested to do this. So, he said: I'm going to have to die, to cleanse you from your self-interest and pride; then you will understand what true service is. Then, you'll understand in part.

But, Jesus added: even when I have done that, you still won't get it, not completely anyway. You won't really get it and be able to live this way, until the Holy Spirit enters into your life and enables you as individuals and communities to live this way.

I want to invite you this morning to examine your lives individually, to think about your lives as Christian families, to think even about your life as a parish community. Have you looked to Jesus and died to self so as to be able to serve God and your neighbour with all that you are? This is not a natural thing; this is not something that everyone shares. This is a personal decision. This may also be a corporate decision that you decide on as the people of God.

I also want to ask you if the Holy Spirit has entered so deeply into your lives as individuals, and as a parish, that you in fact CAN serve God as God has served us, and that you CAN serve those whom you meet as God has served you and them. God's desire for all of humanity, from the beginning, can be expressed in the form of two short statements: that you serve the Lord your God as the Lord your God has served you and given everything for you to be part of his great family, and that you serve everyone you meet on the road of life and treat them as God treats them, as his desired sons and daughters, your brothers and sisters. You cannot do this under your own steam, but even if you have a bad memory as I do, you and I can remember at least these two things and can ask God to enable us to do them by His grace.