

Sermon for October 31, 2021

Proper 26B

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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church

Los Alamos, New Mexico

Ruth 1:1-18

Psalm 146

Hebrews 9:11-14

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes, seeing that Jesus answered the Saducees well, asked him:

“Which commandment is the first of all?”

If you Google “rules to live by”, you get a listing of options: 5, 7, 12, 16 – and they are all different. I like this one:

7 Cardinal Rules of Life

- Make peace with your past so it won't disturb your present.
- What other people think of you is none of your business.
- Time heals almost everything. Give it time.
- No one is in charge of your happiness, except you.
- Don't compare your life to others and don't judge them. You have no idea what their journey is about.
- Stop thinking too much. It's alright not to know the answers. They will come to you when you least expect it.
- Smile. You don't own all the problems of the world.

I was once told there are three things one must always do: the first is: Be Kind.

The second is: Be Kind. The third is: Be Kind.

So, Jesus was kind to the inquisitive Scribe: He says to him:
“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

The Scribe presumably knew of what Jesus spoke. It is part of the daily prayer life in the Jewish tradition: The Shema: *Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*

And then Jesus adds: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” And Jesus includes: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

I’m sure the Scribe was scratching his head at there being two commandments, after all in the Torah there are not just 10 commandments but 613 separate commandments.

Those 613 are divided up into 365 prohibitions, one for each day of the year, and 248 positive commands, one for each bone in the body. In this way, the law of God governs all the days and all the bodily movements. The law required complete devotion.

Reducing 613 commandments to two requires no less of a level of commitment because the first and the second are so closely bound together. It’s not a matter of which, but both.

The first part may have seemed easy, but that part about the neighbor. Well, that may be more of a challenge. That seems to have become especially true in our current situation with the Covid pandemic. If you watch the news, and I don’t necessarily recommend it, we see reports of fights and demonstrations for and against, you name it: masks, mandates, vaccines, this legislation, that legislation, just fill in the blank.

There is a challenge to love someone who is yelling and screaming no matter the issue or the side you're on. That's the difficulty for Christians: We are called to love everyone – not just those who agree with us.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, insists: “If it's not about love, then it's not about God.” There is no compromise on this commandment. You cannot love God and hate your neighbor.

Love is the theme in the story from the Book of Ruth. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah had seen hard times, all three women had lost their husbands, and could no longer live in the lands to where they had followed their husbands.

Naomi is an Israelite, but Orpah and Ruth are Moabites – not really welcome in Israel. They both loved Naomi as their mother-in-law, but Orpah chose not to follow, probably because she considered her odds of re-marriage greater among her own people.

Ruth on the other hand made a radical choice – to tie herself to Naomi – even if it meant never remarrying if she was rejected by Naomi's people. Ruth follows Naomi out of a deep love. Ruth tells her mother-in-law:

“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

Ruth follows Naomi. It will turn out, as you'll see next week, all will be well. If you look at the first chapter of Matthew, Ruth will be the great-grandmother of David, the beloved of the Lord, and the line that will lead to the Jesus.

And Jesus will tell the Scribe:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Let me tell you a story.

There once were two neighbors who shared their farm. They both worked equally hard. They treated each other equally, sharing all profits equally, splitting the harvest equally into their own barns.

One neighbor had a wife and many children; the other lived alone.

While stacking his bags of grain, the single farmer thought to himself that it was unfair to divide the grain equally: he considered his neighbor had many more mouths to feed, and he was by himself. “I know what I'll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put in my neighbor's granary.” And so each evening he carried a sack of grain and placed it in his neighbor's barn.

About the same time, the family man contemplated the plight of his single neighbor, who would have no one to care for him as he grew old. “It is not fair that we divide the grain equally.” So he decided his neighbor would need more than his family, and he carried a sack of grain to his neighbor's barn each evening.

Each day the two would scratch their heads in wonder to discover the same number of sacks in his barn.

One evening they met each other in the land between their barns, each with a sack of grain on his shoulder. Ah hah! They exclaimed, they understood, and embraced with great joy.

And as God looked down from heaven, he saw the two neighbors embracing and said, “I declare this to be a holy place, for I have witnessed extraordinary love here.”

It is said that God chose that spot for Solomon’s Temple.

Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.

Love God. Love your neighbor.

And don’t forget: Be Kind. Be Kind. Be Kind.