

“The Way of Love”

October 25, 2020

Scripture: Psalm 1; Matthew 22:34-40

I don't know about you, but these last several months have forced me to reevaluate and prioritize what's really important in my life. It's been interesting to discover how many things I do and places I go that aren't really necessary. Something I would never have known if I hadn't been prevented from doing them. Having our movement and activities restricted has revealed to me how superfluous so much of my life had become. When we're in the day to day grind of work and family and all the demands that life places on us, it can be hard to take a step back and gain some perspective, to sort out what's gratuitous from what's essential.

I'm learning that, along with some of you I suspect, about the more mundane aspects of my life, but what about the more sacred ones? Is it possible to have a hierarchy of spiritual practices? The question that's posed by this Pharisee, who happens to be an expert in the law, to Jesus is a little bit odd. Which commandment is the most important...? Aren't they all important? In Psalm 1 we hear the psalmist extol the value of keeping the law: “Happy are those...whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on God's law they meditate day and night.” That sounds like an “all or nothing” commitment. The speaker isn't talking about pieces of the law, how can any of it be superfluous? It's all from God.

But the people around Jesus, the teachers of his day, weren't naïve. They knew just how daunting it was to keep this ponderous set of practices perfectly. There are 613 separate commandments in Torah, encompassing every facet of life. How can anyone do all of it? Of course, the reality is, no one could...or can. There's an old Jewish saying that on the day a person keeps the whole Torah, that day the Messiah will arrive. Dedication to Torah isn't so much about accomplishing it, treating it like a task to be mastered, but striving with it, shaping your life around it. One's relationship to Torah is meant to be more like a marriage than a business transaction.

Recognizing that, teachers of Torah were concerned with finding its essence. They wanted to hone in on the fundamentals, where, what poet Gerard Manley Hopkins describes, “there lives the dearest freshness deep down things.” They wanted to get at God's purpose in Torah and root their lives in that rather than superficial appearances of piety. If you've ever read portions of the Talmud, a collection of rabbinic commentary on Torah, you get a sense of what it means to “delight” in the law. The teachers of Israel, the Pharisees around Jesus, spent their lives in a sort of dance with Torah. They engaged in a loving exchange, deeper than study, more passionate than analysis. That's the worldview Jesus is asked to enter with the lawyer's question. Whereas earlier some Pharisees and Herodians joined forces to try and trap Jesus, this Pharisee may be more interested in learning how Jesus sees things.

I suspect he was duly impressed. Jesus' answer would have met the standards of most teachers of his day. A contemporary of Jesus, Rabbi Hillel, was once asked to recite the entire Torah while standing on one foot. He raised one foot and said, “Do nothing to anyone you do not want done to you...all the rest is commentary.” He penetrated to the very essence of the law. For

Hillel it was all about how we regard each other; how we see ourselves in each other. For Jesus that regard is rooted in our relationship with God. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength” is the phrase that follows the prayer every devout Jew utters each day: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one!” It’s straight out of Deuteronomy.

And it’s because of this love for God that we are then compelled to love our neighbor as our self. For Jesus these two loves are inextricably bound: you cannot love God if you do not love your neighbor and you cannot truly love your neighbor if you do not love God. For you see, God lives in your neighbor, just as God lives in you.

This is not just the essence of the law and the prophets; it’s the essence of the gospel. Jesus’ whole life and teaching, his sacrifice and resurrection are all meant to point us to this truth: God lives in us! And love is the path we walk to discover God’s presence. Love is how we meditate on the God’s law. It’s not about following rules and measuring every action and thought, holding our consciences hostage out of fear of retribution; it’s about love.

When we walk the way of love, we see God all around us and in every other person. We are united with the cosmos, God’s symphony of love. And because we see God in each other, we are shattered by the suffering of those around us. It’s not enough only to rejoice in the well-being of others, we must also hurt when others suffer. Just as God takes on the pain of the world in Christ, we take on the pain of those around us who are rejected, who are fleeing persecution, who are left out. Their agony is ours. So, it’s no longer possible to think about what’s happening to refugees at our borders in purely political terms. Our lives can never be only about what’s most expedient for us. If our lives are meant to serve God, then they’re meant to serve our neighbor.

That’s the essence of Torah and the essence of the gospel. And it lies at the heart of leadership within the church. We elect elders and deacons not because they’re efficiency experts or good managers but because they can teach us how to love. They’re called to serve in this way because they, like each of us, are on a journey of learning what is the essence of our life together, our love for God and one another. So, today we are ordaining and installing several people who have been chosen for that important work.....