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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A24  
21 Pentecost (Proper 25A) 11:00 a.m. Online Eucharist  
Sunday 25 October 2020 Recorded (10/22/20)

Deuteronomy 34:1-12  
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17  
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8  
Matthew 22:34-46

### **Loving Your Neighbor Is Not Enough**

"Lord, you have been our refuge from one generation to another" (Ps. 90).

"God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason."<sup>1</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961) the second Secretary General of the United Nations wrote this in a journal that was discovered after his death in a plane crash in Africa.

Who is God? Who is the one who gives us time. How do we come closer to the holy and radiant one, the mysterious source who brings forth new life and is the object of our gratitude?

After Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem with the crowds shouting Hosanna. After he casts out the money changers from the temple, after he has taken up residence teaching and healing, the religious leaders try one last time to test Jesus, to trip him up in his words so that they might condemn him. They open the debate by asking which of the 613 commandments in scripture is the most important one.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5. "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul and with all of your mind." He goes on to quote Leviticus 19:18 that the second most important commandment is, "to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and prophets" (Mt. 22).

When I was five years old on a Saturday afternoon the neighborhood kids told me to ring my neighbor's doorbell for some reason that I cannot remember. They knew that he worked that night shift and that he would be sleeping. With a red face he screamed and swore at me. I had no idea what I had done wrong. We all have had experiences like this. When we hear the word "Commandment" we think of being punished for doing something wrong. But this is not the sense of Jesus' commandments.

God loves in freedom not by forcing or compelling us as a dictator would. Instead through these instructions God helps direct our life toward joy.

The context of the readings Jesus uses is part of his message. In Deuteronomy it says to

love God and to teach our children to love God so that the community will thrive, so that, "your days may be long."<sup>3</sup> This is the direction that God gives us so that we will be as complete and whole as we were created to be. The context of the second commandment from Leviticus shows us what it looks like to love your neighbor. It means leaving some of the leftovers in your fields so that the poor have something to eat. It means paying people on time and keeping your word and caring for disabled people (Lev. 19).

In our daily life we meet plenty of people who believe in the Golden Rule, in treating others as they want to be treated themselves. We know those who subscribe to Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative to act according to the same principles with which you want others to apply to you. Many people around us believe that theoretically this is how we should behave to others. But not so many around us believe in God.

Because of this each of us needs to be a witness, to have an answer to a simple question. Why God? Why should God come first? What does the love of God look like in our life?

1. Idolatry. We are creatures who need meaning as much as we require food, shelter and rest. Decisions we make about meaning and what we commit ourselves to may be dangerous to ourselves and others. This week I met with two new staff members and we shared the story of our lives. Those stories don't just exist in our individual minds or in those around us. They are in God too.

Idolatry or idol worship is what we do when we treat something in our life as if it were a god. It might be obvious things like money, politics, pleasure, your reputation or career. But it can also be more subtle. It can be something so good in itself, like a mother's love for her child, but which cannot bear the weight of being the absolutely most important thing in our life.

The twentieth century author C.S. Lewis wrote a very brief book about hell and heaven called *The Great Divorce*. It begins with what seems like an infinitely expansive gray city where it is always dusk, and always raining. The people there are so ghostlike that they barely exist. Some decide to ride a bus to a beautiful, colorful more real place with vivid grass, flowers, trees and blue sky.

They go to the outskirts of heaven and they all have the chance to stay there but something keeps drawing them away from God and into themselves. One woman expects to meet her son there. She invested her whole life into his well-being. He was

her god and when he died, in her mourning she treated her husband and daughter terribly. She is so angry with God, and this anger has displaced her real self.

To the relative who meets her there she says things like, "You wouldn't say that if you were a mother," "how could anyone love their son more than I did." And the relative tries to explain, "You exist as Michael's mother only because you first exist as God's creature. That relation is older and closer."<sup>4</sup>

The person guiding the narrator says that in the end there are only two kinds of people. There are those who say to God "thy will be done." And those who prefer something else to reality and to joy. To these people God says, "thy will be done." Without the real God in our life we have a terrible tendency to make our own gods.

2. Inadequacy. The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) writes that, "the illusion that we can disillusion ourselves is the greatest of all illusions."<sup>5</sup> We talk as if when it comes to God we are capable of even understanding God. We also act as if we could achieve some sort of detached neutrality, as if we are the ones who are judging God. But to use Barth's words, "We cannot master God. We cannot come behind God. We cannot grasp God but only be grasped by God."<sup>6</sup>

The nature of God is not an abstract question. How we understand God makes a demand on how we must live. This is not the God of the philosophy shop, of abstractions, of hypothetical cases or words like "omnipotence." What we really long for is the real God, the one who can actually help us and love us.

We can't love adequately without God because God is the one who shows us how to love. Walking with Christ is how we know the way. As I said earlier we are not compelled by God. God does not force us to love him, because that would no longer be love. Karl Barth writes that God directs us through what he calls hints or advice. "It is not a loud and stern and foreign thing, but the quiet and gentle and intimate awakening of children in the Father's house to life in that house."<sup>7</sup>

And so as people of faith we believe that we are never fully isolated in this world. There is so much that we may forget but it is not lost because it is in God. We may suffer. The cruelty and injustice may tempt us to despair but we are never completely alone. We just have to know how to seek out this one who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

There is a story about a child of a Hasidic rabbi used to go out and wander in the forest. One day his father asked him what he was doing. The boy said, "I go to the forest to find God." The kindly rabbi said, "That's wonderful. But you don't need to go to the forest to

find God. Don't you know that God is the same everywhere?" "God is," the boy answered, "but I'm not."<sup>8</sup>

Prayer is also something that we learn and grow in over time. In his book *Diary of a Country Priest* Georges Bernanos writes about this. "The usual notion of prayer is so absurd. How can those who know nothing about it, who pray little or not at all, dare to speak frivolously of prayer?... If it were really what they suppose, a kind of chatter, the dialogue of a madman with his shadow, or even less – a vain and superstitious sort of petition to be given the good things of this world, how could innumerable people find comfort until their dying day... in the sheer, robust, vigorous, abundant joy of prayer?... Could a sane man set himself up as a judge of music because he has sometimes touched the keyboard with the tips of his fingers?"<sup>9</sup>

One of my favorite parts of the Lewis' book *The Great Divorce* is when the ghost of the boy's mother keeps trying to prove that the angel who greeted her is wrong, that her case is really different, that she loves her son more than God does. And the angel says, "We are all wrong."

Albert Einstein said that there are two ways of experiencing reality: as if everything is a miracle or as if nothing is. We are all wrong when it comes to God but this week let your life be a miracle. Reach out to the one who is closer to you than you are to yourself. Let us try again to love the Lord with all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* tr. Leif Sjöberg and W.H. Auden (NY: Alfred A Knopf, 1965) 56.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Waetjen, *Matthew's Theology of Fulfillment, Its Universality and Its Ethnicity* (NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> "Now this is the commandment – the statutes and ordinances that that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding to you, so that your days may be long" (Deuteronomy 6:1-2, NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (NY: Macmillan, 1946) 92.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1 The Doctrine of God* Tr. T.H.L. Parker, W.B. Johnston, Harold Knight, J.L.M. Hare (NY: T&T Clark, 1957) 169.

<sup>6</sup> *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, ed. G. Sauter, 1982, 232. Cited in Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999) 106.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1 The Doctrine of Reconciliation* tr. G.W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 1956) 100.

<sup>8</sup> David J. Wolpe, *Why Faith Matters* (NY: HarperOne, 2008) 118.

<sup>9</sup> George Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*.