

Sermon for Pentecost 24 (25A)

October 26, 2008

Christ Church, Andover

Jeffrey Gill

Matthew 22:34-46

Yesterday this place was alive with people and activity – people from eleven different Episcopal parishes in the Merrimack Valley deanery, all taking part in a series of workshops to strengthen congregational ministries here in our area. Our Bishop Suffragan, Bud Cederholm, was here and led a session for clergy and vestry members. In it he challenged us to think about how we would define our *mission* as a parish. What is our mission? Do we have a mission statement? Do people know what it is? And what are our core values? And he said that people should know, by the time they've visited here a few times, what those core values are!

Well, we have a *vision* statement. You have it right there in your bulletin every Sunday!

*It is the Vision of Christ Church to be an open, welcoming Episcopal congregation living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we seek to nurture our spiritual growth through worship and prayer, learning and teaching, support and service. We aspire to put God's love into action within our own lives, in our congregation and in our world.*

Sounds pretty good, huh? How many of you know it by heart?! We don't, do we!

Oh yes, and we have a statement of core values, too. They're right there on our homepage on the web: Inspiration, Hospitality, Generosity, Mission. Sounds pretty good, huh? How many of you knew *them*?! That's what I thought – not many of you. Perhaps we don't do a good enough job of talking about them – or about our vision statement. OR, it's always possible that we have not formulated them in a way that makes them easy for us to remember.

But I've thought about this, and I have a suggestion for a mission statement that flows nicely from our vision, and one that we really could remember. Now I must admit – it's not original with me. It's something that Jesus says in today's gospel. And it's not even original with him. But it *is* the sum of the whole matter. Jesus was talking with a group of Pharisees, and one of them who was a lawyer asked him what he thought would be a difficult question: "Which of the commandments in the law is the greatest?"

Jesus didn't hesitate: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Together we know them as The Great Commandment. That is our mission! Love God – with all your heart, soul, and mind. And, Love your neighbor – as yourself.

I love the image of the cross as a symbol of this Great Commandment. One bar is vertical. It represents the love that flows from God to us and from us back to God again. The other is a horizontal bar, which represents the love that flows in our human relationships, from us to neighbor, and by extension, throughout the creation. One represents the transcendent; the other the imminent. It covers all the bases – with love!

And did you hear what Jesus said about the love we are to have for God? He said we were to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind!

Now a lot of Christians haven't figured out that you can love God with your mind. They think it's all about warm feelings and inner peace – about the comfort you feel when you stop thinking about things too hard, and just let yourself fall into God's arms as you do would a loving parent. They think you have to put your mind on hold if you're going to love God. Every once in a while I have someone come to me and tell me that they're struggling. They just don't know how to reconcile their belief in God with things like... evolution, or the Virgin Birth, or something they say (or don't say) in the Creed. Or I hear parents tell me that their teenage children are beginning to question God, because they don't believe any longer what the Bible says about creation, and they've heard somewhere that you can't believe in God and science at the same time. [Sigh!]

I feel kind of bad when I hear these things, because I realize we haven't done our job very well (I haven't done MY job very well!) of teaching people to love God with their whole mind! That's part of what our Anglican forebears rediscovered during the English Reformation – that *reason*, the life of the mind, is an important vehicle, right alongside scripture and tradition, for our understanding and our love of God. God gave us minds to use – yes, science is one of the ways we discover truth, and it's not in opposition to, but helps us fill out and inform our faith. One of my inspirations when it comes to the compatibility of science and faith is a parishioner in my former congregation, who sang in our choir on Sundays, and even wrote some of the most beautiful and poetic anthems sung by our choir. He is also the Mallinkrodt Professor of Physics and sometime chair of the Physics Department at Harvard University. We have scientists who sit in our pews here, too. We value what they do, because they help us know God more deeply through their discoveries and explorations of the mysteries of creation. They open our eyes to the wonder of creation, and help us understand what that beautiful poetic language of Genesis means when it says, "In the beginning," and help us understand *how* it is that God created the heavens and the earth.

So, keep asking the questions! They only take you to a deeper place, which none of us should fear. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, *and* with all your mind!"

“And the second,” he says, “is like it: you shall *love your neighbor as yourself.*”

This week Alan Greenspan admitted in so many words that he had underestimated the probability of *greed* as a factor in how banks and their shareholders conducted themselves during his tenure as the Chairman of the Federal Reserve. He thought that shareholder interests, in the aggregate, would be self-regulating. It came as a surprise to him that some people would put their self-interest ahead of the interests of others!

Loving our neighbor as our self is not always easy for us! We like taking care of Number One first. If greed has gotten us where we are in our current financial crisis (and that includes not just banks and investors, but any of us who have borrowed our way into an unsustainable lifestyle – any of us who have gambled on the presumption of unfettered growth for the sake of satisfying our own desires), then perhaps, just perhaps, it is loving our neighbor as ourselves that will show us the way out of it. I don’t know what it will look like, what shape it might take, but I have a feeling that if there is a silver lining to this cloud we’re now under, it just might be the possibility of our realizing that we share in a global network of relationships, a global economy that has rich and it has poor, and that what happens to one of us affects all of us. Perhaps the silver lining could be that we start paying more attention to the inequality in our world, and stop living as if we’re the only ones who matter. Perhaps we’ll learn to devise new methods, new systems, new models for how capital flows and benefits not just the few at the top, but all of us.

“And the second is like unto it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Like the bars of the cross that I mentioned, these two things, love of God and love of neighbor, are related. In fact, they are intimately tied to one another. One without the other is incomplete.

There may be all sorts of reasons for loving your neighbor, but if our love for neighbor is not rooted in and connected to our love of God, it lacks something really important. There’s the Andrew Carnegie approach to life: “How to Win Friends and Influence People” – being a good guy, doing nice things for people -- but that can be motivated by self-interest: winning friends and influencing people! But there’s an even deeper kind of love that goes beyond our self-interest and arises out of our God-consciousness – we *love others* because *God loves us* – not because of what we might gain from it.

And it’s just as true that loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind is incomplete, unless it issues forth in our actions. It has to be more than words, and it has to be more than feelings. It must show itself in how we live and in what we do, how we live it out in our relationship with those around us – our neighbors.

Mahatma Gandhi said a lot of powerful things, but one that I love that has been quoted often lately is this: “Be the change you want to see!” There’s another related quote I can’t seem to find the origin for, but I like it all the same. And that is, “We become what we worship.” They both underscore the connection between these two dimensions of God and neighbor, the vertical and the horizontal web of relationships in which we find ourselves.

My new friend and author, Brian McLaren, talked in a recent interview about the important connection between these two dimensions, particularly as they relate to spiritual practices and social action. He said,

...these two [things] are tightly connected. Here's one way to say it. If I want to see change in the world, the change needs to begin in myself. If I want to see the world become more peaceful, for example, I need to become a person of peace. If I want the world to become less consumptive, I need to become more self-disciplined, and so on. So, to be the change we want to see in the world, we need spiritual practices that help us change. If you imagine a bunch of greedy people trying to make the world more generous, or a bunch of bitter people trying to make the world more forgiving, you see the folly of seeking local, national, or global change without paying attention to spiritual formation.

But it's never either or. You don't sit around in your church building waiting to become perfect before you go out to make a difference, because it turns out that making a difference involves spiritual practices as well - working for justice, building relationships with "the other," showing hospitality and kindness, giving away money to those in need, and so on. We are formed through the practices of service, advocacy, hospitality, and so on ... just as we are by fasting and prayer.

Well, I say that we all memorize a new mission statement here at Christ Church. This is what we’re all about! Our mission must be to “Love God with our whole heart, soul, and MIND; and Love our neighbor as ourselves!”

There, how does that feel? I say we give it a try!