

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
October 25, 2020
Dr. Wade P. Hinkle
Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring, VA

Matthew 22: 34-46

Love Thy Neighbor with Prayer and Witness

Good morning. Welcome to those who have gathered this morning for socially-distanced worship here at the Church of the Holy Cross. And welcome to those worshipping with us online.

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew Chapter 22 contains what may be the most well-known passage in the New Testament.¹ Verse 39: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Given what the year 2020 has been like for our community and our nation, I can't think of a more important thought to contemplate this morning.

Now, the New Testament is not the first time we encounter this instruction from God. We read it first in Leviticus Chapter 19: "[Y]ou shall love your neighbor as yourself..."²

The difference, though, between Israel first hearing the Great Commandment as it emerged into the Promised Land from the Wilderness and Jesus' restatement in Matthew is what had happened in the centuries in between. From the original Ten Commandments given to Israel during the Exodus, priests and scribes had added law after law, so that by Jesus' lifetime, tradition had it that there were 613.³

Not that they had worked so well. Israel and its rulers had behaved so badly that the Exile happened. And the interpretation and enforcement of the laws had become an important mechanism for the Jewish theological elite to maintain power. Indeed, in today's passage from Matthew, Pharisee lawyers are trying to undermine Jesus' ministry by demonstrating Jesus is failing to obey Jewish law.

Jesus answers the charge by saying in effect, "Let me make this simple. Love God and love your neighbor. Concentrate on getting this right."

¹ See the sermon on that subject preached by Fr. Jansen String at St. George's and St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Dundalk, MD, on February 27, 2017. Accessed at <https://www.stgandstm.org/sermon-texts/2017/2/27/love-thy-neighbor-as-thyself>, October 19, 2020.

² Leviticus 19:18. Israel heard the first part of the Great Commandment, love God, in Deuteronomy 6:4-7: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."

³ Rabbi Mendel Weinbach, "Origin of 613 Commandments," Ohr Somayach website. Accessed at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160821193022/http://ohr.edu/973>, October 19, 2020. "A List of the 613 Mitzvot (Commandments)." Judaism 101 website. Accessed at <https://www.jewfaq.org/613.htm>, October 19, 2020.

And 2,000 years later, we still aren't getting this right.

Love thy neighbor may be the hardest thing we try to do as Christians. I know that I fail at this every single day.

To understand this about myself a little better, in preparation for this sermon, I kept a personal log for a week of every time I failed to love my neighbor.

The result was pretty embarrassing. I am apparently incapable of driving in Washington traffic without swearing and cursing at other drivers. I constantly chafed at the covid precautions I had observe to keep others safe. I resented those who did not do the same. I recorded several times where I was dismissive of ideas or thoughts of others. There were several instances where I shouted at the television when I heard something that struck me as willfully stupid.

The best I can say for myself is that I am sure I am not unique. My sense is that all of us are finding it increasingly difficult to love our neighbors. We are exhausted by the virus. Required to keep social distance, and experiencing many who will not, our world is beginning to close in, and empathy is more and more difficult.

One thing that people do when they begin to feel overwhelmed as individuals is to look around for others in similar situations. We feel more secure when with people who have the same outlook. You know the old adage: there is power in numbers.

Sociologists and anthropologists call this phenomenon "group identity." And in theory it can be helpful. Like-minded groups can collectively solve problems beyond the ability of any one individual to address. They can provide a sense of well-being and fellowship.

Except that history has also shown that when a group feels its identify threatened, when outsiders seem to pose a challenge to the continuation of the group, terrible things can happen. Repression, persecution, war, genocide.

Now, it's tempting to comfort oneself with the idea that modern society, particularly over the past 60 years or so, has moved past the mobilization of groups for violence and suppression of others.

So I have also found it useful the past few weeks to remind myself that such things have occurred during my lifetime, and indeed are occurring even today.

Shortly after 9/11, I was invited to become a visiting professor at the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama. While I was there, Mary came to see me and we decided to visit the National Voting Rights Museum in nearby Selma.⁴ The museum, which had opened a few years earlier, documents the struggle for civil rights and an end to discrimination, with a special focus on the famous march in Selma in 1965. Many of the docents we met had been on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where they were beaten by police along with the late John Lewis, the famous civil rights leader who later went on to 33 years in Congress.⁵

⁴ National Voting Rights Museum and Institute homepage. Accessed at <http://nvrmi.com/>, October 19, 2020.

⁵ See Lewis' autobiography co-authored with Mike D'Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (Simon & Shuster, 1998).

Mary was not even three when his happened, and she knew of it only vaguely. But the visit to the museum helped me remember, and to recall a time when some Whites felt the concept of racial equality to be so threatening to their identity that they orchestrated a campaign of repression and violence to try to prevent it.

Some years later, the Pentagon sent me to work in Cambodia. I knew vaguely about recent Cambodian history, but wanted to learn more. So, I visited the Killing Fields Museum in Phnom Pehn.⁶ The museum is a former high school that was taken over by the Khmer Rouge in 1976 and converted into a torture, interrogation, and execution center for those who were thought to oppose the new communist regime.

The high school is now a memorial to the 14,000 people who perished there. And during my visit, I did remember that the Khmer Rouge had done this when I was in college. I was alive when it happened. Somewhere between one-and-a-half million and two million Cambodians perished overall – 25% of the population.⁷

And this morning, as we meet for worship, there may be as many as 1 million Uyghurs being held in Chinese concentration camps simply because of their ethnicity and religious beliefs.⁸

So, we are failing ourselves as individuals to live as Christ commands us, and when we come together in community, we are often acting out of fear, and the result can be deeply harmful.

I think today's reading from Matthew offers an important way forward, augmented by other New Testament teachings.

There are two parts to the Great Commandment: love God, and love thy neighbor. The first thought, focus on God, suggests where we can look for help regarding our own thinking and behavior. It is hard to live as God asks. But God is available to supply unlimited help, if only we can learn to request it. That's why we are told to love God with all our heart and mind. Because when we do, God fills us in return with grace and love.

And how to go about this? For me, the answer is clear and even simple.

Pray. Pray to communicate your need for connection to God, and ask for God's help in daily living. Prayer is so important that Jesus does it himself, constantly. He even specifically teaches

⁶ The Killing Fields Museum of Cambodia homepage. Accessed at <http://www.killingfieldsmuseum.com/>, October 19, 2020.

⁷ Patrick Heuveline, "The Demographic Analysis of Mortality Crises: The Case of Cambodia, 1970–1979," in *Forced Migration and Mortality*, (National Academies Press, 2001), pp. 102–105. "As best as can now be estimated, over two million Cambodians died during the 1970s because of the political events of the decade, the vast majority of them during the mere four years of the 'Khmer Rouge' regime. This number of deaths is even more staggering when related to the size of the Cambodian population, then less than eight million."

⁸ Reuters, "U.N. says it has credible reports that China holds million Uighurs in secret camps", August 10, 2018. Accessed at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-rights-un/u-n-says-it-has-credible-reports-that-china-holds-million-uighurs-in-secret-camps-idUSKBN1KVISU>, October 19, 2020; British Broadcasting Corporation, "China Uighurs: One million held in political camps, UN told," August 10, 2018. Accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-45147972>, October 19, 2020.

his followers how to do it, and the words to use in the Lord's Prayer.⁹ As we read in James Chapter 1, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you."¹⁰

For me, the key to using prayer successfully is to make it a habit. As the first letter to the Thessalonians says, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing..."¹¹ When you fail to love your neighbor, say a prayer. When you are encountering situations where you know you will be stressed, or tired, or tempted to lash out, try to pray proactively.

So, what about learning how to live in community in a positive and Godly way? Here, I believe, the key is to use loving thy neighbor as a way of creating a new identity for ourselves. And that new identity is that *we are all the people of God*.

This is the new identity that God offers in the Old Testament and Jesus represents in the New Testament. We are told in 2 Corinthians that God said, "I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."¹²

And, unlike the often toxic and exclusionary identities of contemporary nationalities, ethnicities, and ideologies, this identity is open to all. And it is grounded in the idea of love thy neighbor.

So how do we foster and encourage the adoption of this new identity? To me, the answer is witness. Live truly God's call to love thy neighbor, *and* be willing to offer witness that you are doing so because you are Christian.

Don't be shy. When asked why you are contributing food to CHO, explain it is because you are a Christian. When asked why you are helping take voters to the polls, same answer. When you take food to a sick neighbor, or even just spend time with someone you know is lonely, let them know why.

The community of the people of God is a gift from God. But it won't form and sustain itself. This is the work that God has given us to do. Let's each of us reaffirm this charge this week by loving God, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Amen.

⁹ Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:1.

¹⁰ James 1:5.

¹¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:16.

¹² 2 Corinthians 6:16.