

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 ~ Matthew 22:34-40

Our Greatest Action

21st Sunday after Pentecost ~ Reformation Sunday ~ Sacrament of Baptism

October 25, 2020

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Introduction to Gospel:

Congratulations! We have finally made it to the *last* question that Jesus was asked in his long and spicy verbal dispute that we have worked through over the past five Sundays. Religious and political power players: the chief priests, elders, Pharisees, Herodians and the Sadducees have been having it out with him. Today we hear Jesus' final word, in this verbal smackdown that occurred in the temple in Jerusalem on Jesus' last Monday on earth, according to Matthew.

Today we are also celebrating Reformation Sunday, now 503 years since October 31, 1517, the day from which we trace the spark that ignited the Protestant Reformation. Yup, the Holy Ghost blew up a fuss on Halloween! When Martin Luther issued a not so gentle reproof of his church and all the ways it was missing the mark. For his rant, he didn't have Facebook or Twitter, Instagram or TikTok, but the medium of his time: Pamphlets on the door of his church, the Wittenberg chapel in Germany. And yes: and they went viral... In the good sense.

Today, we will be baptizing six-month old Teddy Robert Phillips, into the one holy catholic and apostolic church, claiming the truth that he is God's beloved child of the covenant. He will become, officially, a member of the household of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit. So perhaps this is the perfect Sunday to consider the commandment at the axis of our faith. The number one "house rule."

Sermon:

When I was six years old, my family spent the whole summer in England. At the time, we are talking 1960's, no matter where you went across the UK, there were sheep. Flocks of them. Over hill and dale: wherever you went, sheep were everywhere. And so before long one day, my mom said, "these sheep are ubiquitous!" From then on, throughout the summer, we no longer called them sheep. We called them "ubiquitous." At the end of the summer on our last day in England, I still had a little bit of pocket change to spend and so one day we were in a little shop of trinkets where my eyes landed on exactly what I wanted to buy. So, I went up to the counter and asked the clerk, "How much is that *ubiquitous* in the window?" A look of surprise and confusion shot across her face, meanwhile my older three siblings and mom, who overheard my question burst into laughter. I had no idea why they were laughing, and felt my face flush with embarrassment and confusion, the way you do when grown ups are laughing at you and you have no idea why. I had said exactly what they had been saying all summer. What's so funny?

Obviously, I didn't know that "ubiquitous" was an adjective that meant "present, appearing or found everywhere." I thought it was the name for those white woolly animals that dotted the British countryside. Vocabulary words. Aren't they fun? Or not. In the 7th grade we had to learn 25 of them every other week: how to spell them, their definition, and how to use

them in a sentence. “OK class, clear your desks, get out one sheet of paper and your pencil, here we go...” Of course, if you don’t use a new word, you lose it, you forget it. Or if you don’t really understand what it means, that can cause more dire consequences than my six-year old red face that day in the shop in England. A word only becomes a part of our vocabulary when we start using it correctly and frequently. If we do that, eventually, it becomes a part of your personhood.

Perhaps no word is more over-said or misunderstood than the one verb, the one and only action word in our greatest commandment. Yes, I’m talking about that four-letter word: L-O-V-E, love. “You shall **love** the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and you shall **love** your neighbor as yourself.” That’s the one word on which our entire faith, our whole Bible, our one holy catholic and apostolic church is based. In the temple that day, Jesus was reminding his own people, of their greatest, two-part commandment. One that, perhaps, Jesus had determined they were not using correctly or frequently enough in the practice of their faith.

Our Leviticus lesson has a good vocabulary word for us. We had to look it up at our “First Look” Bible Study on Wednesday. That word is “reprove.” Tucked between all those “You shall nots” was this: “You shall *reprove* your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.” The Hebrew word *yakach*, translated “reprove”, means to correct or criticize gently—to express disapproval. Let’s be honest: Who likes to be reproved? I know I don’t. Do any of us look forward to being criticized or corrected? I doubt it. And yet, that is what Jesus is doing right here in the temple: out of love for God, for neighbor, and for his church/temple. Again, and again Jesus brings them back to their own scriptures, back to the core of their tradition, with some definite reproofing along the way, “Have you never read in the scriptures?”

Jesus did not pull up one of the Ten Commandments. Instead he invoked the Shema, the most essential prayer in all of Judaism, taken from Deuteronomy 6:4-6, bringing his questioners and religious colleagues back to the spiritual and theological center of their shared tradition, that had proliferated to 613 commandments. And he linked it inextricably to Leviticus 19:18, the heart of their shared holiness code, spelled out in meticulous detail for nine chapters in Leviticus, chapters 17-26.

Jesus’ linking of these two commandments was also not an original move on Jesus’ part. These two commandments had already been pulled together in other ancient Jewish texts. We see evidence of this in our New Testament in Luke 10:27. It is the lawyer in Luke who responds to Jesus’ question, “What is written in the law?” with this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Sounds like something he was taught in Torah school. Jesus tells him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” When the lawyer shoots back to Jesus the question, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus answers that question with the parable we now call, “The Good Samaritan,” bursting any boundaries or limitations we might hope to erect around the definition of neighbor.

Do this: Do love. That is not the same as feeling love. You cannot *command* someone to feel love, can you? Good news: Jesus is not commanding us to like or feel affection for everyone: family, friend, and enemy. The command is to *do* love. It helps to get the meaning of the love command right. It's not about our feelings. It is about our actions. The truth is right here in the Torah and in our Gospel: We cannot love God without loving our neighbor. And God knows, we cannot love our family, friends, and enemies without the love of God in our hearts, souls, and minds. It's about commitment. No matter how we feel: to "do love" is a commitment to respect, to restore, to renew and unite in the common cause of community and our shared life on this planet.

To be honest, and this may surprise you, love is actually very hard to preach about. It's too big. Too important. And too complicated. But today, I have Leviticus 19:15-18 to help me out. How do we do love like Jesus is commanding us to? We can break it down a little by zeroing in on the teaching in Leviticus: We can refuse to hate, to slander, to hold a grudge, or take vengeance on another person or group of people. Next time just before we hit the send button or post or retweet something, let's check these boxes. Is there hate, slander, grudge, or vengeance in what we are about to use in our next sentence? If so, we are *not* loving our neighbor as ourselves. Delete. Do not use it in your next sentence.

You may think that this definition: No slander, no hate, no vengeance, no grudges might disqualify all politicians? Certainly not. Our democracy depends on mutual respect, reproof, and compromise, all toward the greater good, toward a more perfect union. We had a refreshing reminder of what that looks like last week when Chris Peters and Lt. Governor Spencer Cox, the Democratic and Republican candidates for Utah's next governor teamed up to make a 30 second joint ad in order to spread a positive message to help unify our country that is so deeply divided... Here's the link: https://youtu.be/w5_ajRH0QN8.

Thirty seconds that demonstrate in the political sphere what Jesus was teaching. Here in 2020. We have it in us: as individuals, as a country and as a church. We have come a long way from the issues that provoked Martin Luther's reproof of his church. Rather than congratulating ourselves that those issues are no longer our problem, being offspring of the Reformation, we need to ask ourselves as a church, what reproofs from Jesus are we not hearing? What neighbors are we not loving? How are we being called to act to redress the sins of our time? Voter suppression, the separation of children from their parents at the southern border for any reason, the legacy and far reaching consequences of systemic racism: I hear God calling us to our greatest action on all of these and more.

My friends, to grow a vocabulary for Christian discipleship, we have to use "LOVE" in every sentence or be sentenced to a life that is not life, not the life God made us for, not the life Jesus came to show us and live and was sentenced to die for. I have a poem titled, "the valley of its making" by Nate Marshall, author, poet, playwright, educator, speaker and rapper, that speaks to the truth of our time and our place in it. Here is a part of it that sounds like gospel truth to me:

*the people still fight
 each other too much &
 the system not enough
 & too often it is not a fight
 but a bullet. too many men
 want to be in the front
 & don't want to march
 anywhere in particular.
 some of us have degrees
 & noses to look down
 so many want a version
 of old days that never
 existed. many are still unwilling
 to grow a vocabulary for personhood,
 even from the words already in them...
 you make happening happen.
 we happen to love. this is our greatest
 action.ⁱ*

I hear Jesus calling us to grow a vocabulary for personhood for all persons. I hear Jesus calling us to let love be our greatest action: Love, yes for ourselves, under those masks and disguises. Love like Jesus has for Teddy. Not because of anything he did or didn't do. Just because he is. Just because you are. The capacity to love is already in us. Let's use it as God intends. Let's make love our greatest action: Let's make Jesus' love ubiquitous.

ⁱ Nate Marshall, *FINNA, poems*, from "the valley of its making," (Random House, One World: New York, NY, 2020), pp. 51-52.