

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 90, Matthew 22:34-46
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In all seriousness, I feel as though we should take a moment of silence after having heard in Deuteronomy that Moses had died. We're told at the very end of the Torah or five books of the Jewish Law that, "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face."

If not for the incredible leadership of Moses, in the face of overwhelming odds and under the most difficult of circumstances, there might be no such thing as Judaism today and perhaps no Christianity either. Moses was clearly one of the very few all-time greats for people of faith like us.

I don't believe Moses would have argued with Jesus when he cited as the greatest commandment to love God with all one's heart, soul and mind and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The first five books of the Bible were for a long time purported to have been written by Moses. We know today with modern scholarship that could not be the case. They include, however, 613 commandments, including the 10 we're most familiar with. We might say that all the other commandments are commentary on these two that Jesus recites. If we look at just the Ten Commandments for a moment, we see that the first four are about honoring God and the next six involve treatment of people or neighbors.

An old joke is told about God and the first Welshman. God says to him, "I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I am going to give you soaring mountains with thick green flanks, perfect for grazing sheep. I'll give you beaches and coves and gorse grown headlands above a plentiful sea. I'll give you rolling hills and valleys beneath which you'll find rich minerals. Your land will be one of the most beautiful on earth."

"Great!" the Welshman exclaimed. "What's the bad news?"

God replied, "Wait 'til you see your neighbors."

We don't need to be Welsh to appreciate that joke. The first and great commandment would be so much easier if we only had to love God, an abstract being we cannot see. Loving flesh and blood is another matter altogether.

The author of the First Letter of John gets to the point when he writes, "If anyone says I love God and hates his brother or sister, he is a liar; for he who does not love a brother or sister whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." (1 John 4:20)

One of my resources for this sermon equated this two-part commandment to the two hinges on a door. The door cannot operate correctly without both hinges attached. We might say our faith hangs on the love of God and neighbor. We really can't have one without the other.

Someone else said a neighbor is someone with a face. While we need to help people in desperation across this country and the world that we will never see or meet, the commandment is to especially love all those we encounter face to face on a daily basis.

I was reading the sports page in the Times Dispatch Thursday morning just before I sat down to start this sermon. I was particularly interested in the article about Tony Bennett, coach of the UVA basketball team. While his players we're quoted as saying, based on last year's performance, the team should, "...go deep, deep into the NCAA tournament." Bennett, being more the realist, would never make such a claim. For him it's all about actual performance game after game. Last year was last year. This year, we'll see. He hopes they can perform at their maximum potential, win or lose.

We might think we love God and please the Master, but the proof is in the day-to-day encounters we have with real human beings, whether they be family members, co-workers, literal next-door neighbors or strangers we meet at the market or along the road. Our faithfulness is not measured by how we feel about God or our fellow human beings, but how we act or perform toward each and every one we have daily contact with.

The next thing we need to do is define "love." As I've said so many times before, in the New Testament love is usually an action and not an emotion. It's easy to be kind and helpful to someone we feel affection for or have a lot in common with. It's even easier to come to the aid of someone who genuinely likes us.

Bernard of Clairvaux, a 12th century saint, said it like this: "Love seeks no cause beyond itself and no fruit; it is its own fruit, its own enjoyment. I love because I love; I love in order that I may love." In other words, divine love doesn't seek a return or require love to flow back to the giver. God's love is freely given.

Karl Menninger, the eminent psychiatrist, once said, "Love cures. It cures not only those who receive it – it cures those who give it."

Along those same lines, George McDonald, a well known Scottish clergyman, said, "The love of our neighbor is the only door out of the dungeon of the self."

And if you can stand one more pertinent quote, C. S. Lewis wrote, "Love anything, care for anyone, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully

round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, drab, motionless, airless – your heart will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”

Loving all our neighbors as ourselves is hard if not impossible without divine help every day. Maybe that’s why in our collect today, we will pray for more gifts of faith, hope and charity and God’s assistance to love what God commands.

I hope everyone has seen or is planning to watch, when it comes on again, the Public Television series on the Roosevelts.

Eleanor had a troubled childhood and her marriage to Franklin was complicated. She had a large family to raise and a mother-in-law who tried to thwart her at every turn because no one was good enough for her son. When the United States finally entered the First World War, she said she was finally “liberated” to put all her talents to good use. She arranged for the management of her household and spent 12 hours a day, six days a week, helping with the war effort at home serving soldiers in Red Cross canteens.

Eventually, she was asked by the Red Cross to examine St. Elizabeth’s Hospital for the mentally ill in Washington, D.C. She was terrified because it brought back horrible memories of her alcoholic father, but she went and then came back day after day. She reported on the deplorable conditions she found and lobbied hard for better conditions for the men and women in that place. At some point during all this, she wrote, “You must do what you think you cannot do.” She continued to do that all her life.

Loving every neighbor God places along our path is doing what we think we cannot do. Wanting the best for every person as we would want for ourselves or our children is the commandment from God.

None of us can do that perfectly. Most of us can hardly do it well. But there is always tomorrow when we get to begin again, and with God’s help, increase in the gift of love. AMEN.