

## Sermon for Sunday, October 29, 2023

For the several years that Bishop Michael Curry has served as our Presiding Bishop, he has reminded us in his words and in his actions that Jesus' way is the way of love, and we are expected to follow it. If you meet the man, you know that he really does live into it, with his warmth, his smile, his kindness and encouragement, and his deep feelings for those who experience hurt and pain. In this week's "Thank God on Friday, I shared with you his remarks at the most recent meeting of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, and true to form, it was ALL about love.

And why does he do this? Because he was taught by Jesus to do so. In today's Gospel, we hear that loud and clear. But it wasn't a new piece of information back then, just as it isn't a new piece of information today.

The Pharisees are trying their darnedest to figure out a way to say that Jesus violates the Torah, that compendium of almost 700 laws that are part of the ancient Mosaic Covenant. So one of them, a Scribe, asks him what is the greatest of the laws.

Jesus keeps it simple: love God, love your neighbor. But he does so by actually quoting a prayer that every Jew is expected to recite twice a day every day: the Shema. You shall love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your might. This is a direct quote from Deuteronomy 6:4, from one of the books of the law.

And then he simplifies the rest of the Law insofar as relationship with those around us to a single sentence: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

This directly quotes from Leviticus 19:18, another one of the books of the Law: You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Those who pose the question wonder if Jesus is going to water down the law, to make it easier for people. But in fact, he is not: he's saying that the huge code of laws are at their heart a promise to love and worship God and a promise to deal with each other in a caring, loving, equitable way.

Here's the key difference: instead of leading with a "you shall not" phrase, Jesus focuses on what we ARE supposed to do. And he expects that we measure our own behavior on whether it is reflective of love of God and our neighbor, or not. The simplicity is astounding, and the good part is this; it's a two-part test. Is this thing I'm doing about love or about something else? As Bishop Curry says, if it isn't about love, it isn't about God!

Having responded to the question about the law, Jesus poses a question to them: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?”

Remember, we’re in the Gospel of Matthew, and Matthew’s audience respects confirmation that the Messiah is truly a child of Israel.

“The Son of David, of course.” All the prophecies say that a Messiah shall come out of the lineage of King David.

But Jesus then asks a follow-up question. We know from our own experience of watching Law and Order and other courtroom dramas that those follow-up questions are the ones that win the day.

“How is it then that David, inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, calls him Lord, saying,

‘The Lord said to my Lord,  
“Sit at my right hand,  
until I put your enemies under your feet”’?

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”

In other words, how come even King David names the Messiah as Lord above him, as God? David places the Messiah above himself.

That’s a stumper, isn’t it? It shuts down the trick questions that the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the scribes have been pestering Jesus with. Jesus establishes his bona fides as the Messiah, although he himself doesn’t actually use those words.

Now here’s the thing: when Jesus comes on the scene, the Jewish people have been praying and crying for a Messiah, the one promised in the Scriptures. Some may view him as a secular warrior-king, some may see him as someone who will simply get the awful Roman Empire out of their lives. They want the Messiah to do all the work to make them feel happy and safe again.

But by juxtaposing the idea that a person who fulfills all of what was promised about Messiah expects the people – the PEOPLE! – to do something, namely to love God and love each other, he tells people that having a Messiah isn’t a quick solution to a messy problem, it’s the embodiment of what those two laws mean. Jesus loves us so much that he redeems us from our sins. He’s willing to die for us. And that models what he expects of us: to love each other beyond all reason, to trust in God’s love beyond all common sense.

It's about releasing reasonability as a measure of a strategy. Jesus says we are called to be unreasonable. Unreasonably loving. Unreasonably trusting. Unreasonably faithful.

What would the world look like if we were unreasonable people. If we believed – actually believed – that love could change things, that love could help, that love could overcome?

And so I bless you with an unreasonable blessing, one that is shared in the Franciscan community. It embodies this unreasonable faith that Jesus invites us into:

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.