

Called To Love

Mark 12:28-34

November 1, 2009

I.

Today we celebrate one of the principal feast days of the church, All Saints Day. And my sermon this morning will be a little shorter than usual because when I'm finished I would like to ask Janis Floyd to come up and speak to us about St. Thomas, other saints, and stewardship.

And by saints, I'm not referring to a football team a few miles down the road, but rather to all those people from the beginning of our church to the present day who through their selflessness, dedication, and sometimes martyrdom, helped build the church and bring Christ's love into peoples' lives.

It has been said that if we as Christians can see the coming of God's kingdom, it's only because we are standing on the shoulders of the giants who have gone before us. Through their work, courage, and sacrifices, most Christians today are able to worship in freedom, without persecution, and to publicly proclaim their faith.

But saints in the larger sense are not just heroes of the past. We encounter saints in our lives now. God leads people to do holy works all the time. So we should not think that saints are those with whom we cannot identify. We know there are people here today who compassionately have served others and have tried to live holy lives even though they might not have a special day named for them on the church calendar.

And from another perspective, we all are saints just by being Christians. In the Bible Paul addressed most of his letters to the "saints" in this sense. In the Apostles Creed we affirm our belief in the communion of saints as consisting of all Christians, living and dead.

And finally, we remember those who worshipped with us here at St. Thomas this year and now have gone to glory to join the saints in heaven. We lift up and honor the memories of Ralph Dreifus, Mac McElveen, and Jack Boice. May their souls, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

II.

But our unity in the communion of saints does not mean we always live saintly lives. Early reformers of the church proclaimed that we simultaneously are saints and sinners. Our challenge is to emphasize the part about being saints, and to diminish the part about being sinners.

This dilemma can be introduced by the story about a priest and a rabbi standing along a country road, each holding up a sign. The priest's sign said "Turn Before it's Too Late," while the rabbi's proclaimed "The End is Near." Soon a car raced by, and the driver paid no attention to the signs. Almost immediately there was a screeching of tires, followed by a big splash.

The rabbi turned to the priest and asked, "Should we try different signs?" "Yes," said the priest, "perhaps 'Bridge Out' might be better." The point here is that we can find ourselves in deep water when the instructions are not clear. Without direction we are torn between listening to the little angel that sits on one of our shoulders, or to the little devil that sits on the other.

But Jesus tells us how to deal with that. Today's Gospel reading calls us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And while these commandments truly are the solution to our problems and the guiding principles of our Christian faith, they are not easy answers. When we look at the world, at society, and even at the church, we see that these teachings are absent from many parts of contemporary life.

III.

Let's look at these two commandments Jesus proclaimed. They are referred to as the Great Commandments or the Summary of the Law. They include the Ten Commandments, and stand alone as statements of all that our Lord calls us to do. We also find them in the Old Testament (Deut. 6:4-5, Lev. 19:18). There is nothing in our faith that exists apart from, or is unaffected by, the obligation to love God and our neighbor.

But what did Jesus really mean when he gave these instructions to humanity? Can love be commanded? Can love be summoned on demand? Does it come in a flash bang moment, or does it develop over time? How does this kind of love work?

I'm reminded of the story of a fellow who was walking past a bookstore and noticed a book in the window with the title "Learning to Love." He went inside to inquire, and found that it actually was the twelfth volume of an encyclopedia that covered topics from "learning" to "love."

The fellow naturally was disappointed in a way that sometimes parallels what can happen in the church. People come to church searching for a way to learn to love, and instead find an encyclopedia on theology.

But we don't need much theology to love God and our neighbors. That love comes through prayer, and worship, and asking God to help us express it. And even though these two commandments are inseparable I would like to first talk about one, then the other.

When Jesus said to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, he meant that it is something we do with our entire being. How does that happen? Do we scrunch up our eyes, clench our fists, grit our teeth, and just force all of that love to come out of us?

No, not at all. But it does mean that nothing is held in reserve. There are no half measures, no cutting corners, and no doing it tomorrow. Jesus did not say just to trust God, or worship God, or pray to God, or be obedient to God, but rather to love God with all we have. And in loving God we also naturally will do those other things.

As a result, it is not only a matter of feeling, but also of action, doing, commitment, and how we live in the world. It is a response of the human will, a form of behavior that is evident externally and as an example to others. If we love God, then God will be an integral part of how we think, act, decide things, and present ourselves to others.

And when we love our neighbor, we are to do it just *as* we love ourselves. Note that Jesus did not say to love our neighbor *instead* of ourselves or *more than* ourselves, but *as* ourselves. This means we are called to be just as willing to do something for another as we are to do it for ourselves. It is the Golden Rule (Lk. 6:31). We treat needs of others as important as our own needs. And when we do that we actually experience a more complete expression of ourselves.

IV.

That all sounds good, doesn't it? It's hard to disagree with in theory. But we find that it does not happen if we rely only upon ourselves. We, on our own, cannot just manufacture love for God or for anyone else.

Even so, today's Gospel tells us that it is not optional. Jesus did not give us a choice. We are not free to not love. And so, Jesus once again gave us teachings that cannot be fulfilled in our own strength, but rather call upon our faith.

This means that if we truly want to love God and our neighbors, and if we ask God through the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us in this way, then he will enable us to love God and our

neighbors as active and visible manifestations of our being. We will find that we can express to God and others the same love that God first expressed for us (1 Jn. 4:19).

And the church can help us do this. As individuals we probably experience times when these commandments are difficult to follow. As part of the church, however, and as part of the Body of Christ, we find it is easier.

This is evident from the beginning of today's reading. Jesus began his answer to the scribe by saying "Hear O Israel." He was speaking to the community of faith as well as to the people individually. He knew that people, acting alone, without interaction and support from each other, could struggle to truly love each other and put their love of God into action. This call to love embraces more than just individual piety. It also is a call to live together in a community.

V.

So, today, as we enter November and the end of the year draws closer, how do we think that we have loved God and our neighbor? What have we done, and what will we do, to carry out these commandments? Do our lives reflect the qualities of those early saints whose memories we honor today?

Perhaps, as we think back on the year, we might remember individual acts of charity and kindness that we have offered to others, or have received from others, and we might recall deeply spiritual moments where in the silence of prayer we felt the Holy Spirit move within us.

For most of us it is likely that these moments grew from the community of faith that we share here at St. Thomas. And for most of us it also is likely that our ability to live into these two Great Commandments is linked to the collegiality and fellowship we share here in our church.

I know we try to do what Jesus told us to do. And when we do it we see that it is good and our hearts are moved to do even more. Such is the nature of love. The more we give, the more we seem to get back. The more we honor God and each other, the more we seem to be blessed.

We've all heard that old gospel hymn, "When the Saints go Marching In." The lyrics point to a future time when God's kingdom will fully be here. But it doesn't have to be limited to the future. In a way, we know that the saints have been marching in ever since Jesus was born. And we also know that we have been called to be in that number ever since he told us to love God and one another.

And while we probably never will be official saints in the life of the church, we can be saints in the lives of others if we seek God's will through the Holy Spirit, if we share our blessings, and if we love God and others as Christ calls us to do. I pray that our church can continue to be a place where these two great commandments govern all that we do in God's name. *Amen.*