

Date: October 25, 2020 (Pentecost 21)

1. Texts: Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Ps. 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46.
2. Subject: discipleship.
3. Topic: love made practical by Paul.
4. Aim: educate, encourage.
5. Proposition: "Jesus tells us *what to do* and Paul guides us in *how to do it*."

COMMAND AND TEMPLATE

Today's journey may look to you as if it would only make sense to an ordained person, a deacon, priest or bishop. But if you'll stick with the process, I think we'll discover something each disciple can use.

So, Jesus started by thwarting the attempt to trap him in a theological error. His response was that all the laws—and there were somewhere around 613 of them—can be summed up in two Great Commandments:

1. Love God with all that you are and
2. Love other people in the same way.

That is both pretty familiar and pretty clear: God commands us to love and this command applies to everybody. We are to love God with our whole being and to love other people in the same way. Clear.

Then St. Paul guides our application of these commandments.

For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery...As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.¹

Jesus commanded and St. Paul provided the directions. So here's how this application of the command to love works out.

¹ 1 Thessalonians 2:3, 5-8.

First of all, to share the gospel with others is an act of love. It springs from our love from and for God. We share the gospel because we are loved by God and have love for others.

Now, as the passage indicates, we share the gospel not as an act of coercion or spiritual bullying. We share the gospel in love as a sign and indication of God's love. The gospel of love must be shared lovingly. So, we always avoid use of language such as "You should..." or "Hell is a real place." We neither threaten nor bully. We use the gospel as a tool to share the love of God.

According to Christ's command, we share the gospel. We do that with gentleness, understanding, compassion and forbearance. We share the gospel non-coercively and as proof of God's love.

Secondly, we share our very lives with those with whom we share the gospel. That is, we become the embodiment of the gospel for the sake of others. They see and experience God's love in and through us. We are not sharing some kind of theological "head knowledge" or something we read out of the Bible or some other book. In sharing the gospel, we are sharing our experience of God's love. Our lives become living parables that others are able to read and understand.

Lastly, our motive for all this is our own experience of love and salvation. We do not share in the hope of saving someone or controlling them. There is no search for power in sharing. We are not judging or condemning anyone as we share. We have experienced grace, forgiveness and love from God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. So we love God and others in return, as the chief response to our own salvation.

Jesus provided the universal commandment that is the foundation for Christian living and discipleship. St. Paul provided a template for carrying out those two Great Commandments. And, while it may seem that this template might only apply to ordained people, it is clear that all of us should be guided by his directions. God loves us and we love God, so we love others. That love must

be expressed in sharing the gospel with others. We most effectively share our love as we share our lives. Our motive in sharing the gospel of love is our own experience of love, and so our methods of sharing must reflect God's love.

At this stage in our diocesan history, Jesus' Great Commandments and Paul's template must be actively and effectively applied in our ministries. Our obedience to Christ's command and our ability to follow Paul's directions may determine the future of some of our congregations. It may seem harsh, but without such obedience and actions some of our congregations may be facing their final chapter. Without sharing the gospel of love in love and doing it lovingly, some congregations will have to close their doors. It could be that, without obedience to these commandments using the template that Paul provided, our entire diocese and denomination may fade away.

The future of our congregations, our diocese and the Anglican Church of Canada depends on our willingness and choice to be the gospel of love for others. This is as shockingly true for lay disciples as it is for ordained clergy. Given the truth that lay disciples have access to many more relationships than individual clerics, it is more urgent that lay disciples grapple with our future.

We now have to make these commands and this template more concrete and achievable.

The first step is to be aware and certain of your own salvation. You are listening to this sermon because you know that God loves you. Let's rely on that truth. Let's relax in that truth. God loves us and proved that love both in creation and in Christ Jesus. There is nothing anyone can do to stop God's love. Oh, we can easily increase his sorrow through our sin, but we cannot stop his love. Take this reality to heart. Enjoy God's love. Revel in it. Immerse your heart in it. Be loved so that you can be loving to others.

The second step is to stop being afraid to share the gospel. After all, sharing it is maybe *the* act of love. You're not going to be coercive, judgmental or shaming—because all of those would be contrary to the command to love. You're going to be the gospel of love in human form, just as Christ was God's love in

human form. So, stop being afraid of judgment and rejection. Be the gospel. Be the sacrament of God's love to our broken world.

The third step is to make sure that others see and experience God's love through your love. Our loving relationships proclaim not just sentimental attachments to others. Our love proclaims God and is an occasion to experience God himself.

Some people might have been tempted to think that Paul's template for ministry belongs only to those who are ordained ministers. But it has become clear that the two Great Commandments and Paul's directions are meant primarily for lay disciples who will be supported by the example and ministry of the ordained disciples. That's because these commandments and template are part of the foundation of the Christian faith and Christ's Church. The centre of our Church is Christ and the agents of his ministry are his disciples. These commandments and template belong to each one of us and to all of us. These commandments and this template are our future—for which we give thanks to God.

AMEN.