October 25, 2026
Pentecost 22 – Proper 25A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Deuteronomy 34:1-12
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46

In the Name of our loving God: the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

The atmosphere in Matthew's gospel this morning is tense, even hostile. Jesus had been frustrating the religious authorities who have been trying for days to trap him and discredit him. Much is at stake—Jesus' authority, his role, his very identity. This is Jesus' final exam, and it only has one question: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Whew, we say. We know this one! It's in the Prayer Book! The answer trips off our tongue! We are to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and love our neighbors as ourselves. Easy-peasy, right?

My friend Andrew McGowan offers this observation: "I do not think there is any place in the Gospels where Jesus merely answers a question neatly so as to satisfy the hearer and allow them to go away with a neat package of how-to's to make life better or easier or more fulfilling. Rather he always turns the question back somehow to the starting place of the questioner, probing them in unexpected and perhaps unwelcome ways."[1] This, my friends, is how Jesus answers the questions we ask.

But, let's notice what Jesus does not say. Remember again where we are, and what's happening. Decisions about solving the "Jesus Problem" have already been made. Death is close at hand; he doesn't have much time. When he's asked what matters most, he does not say, "Believe the right things." Or "Maintain personal and doctrinal purity." Or "Worship like this or attend a church like that." He doesn't even say, "Read your Bible," or "Pray every day."

What does he say? "Love." That's it. At the crossroads of life and death, Jesus tells us everything we need to know about life in God, boiled down to its essence. *Love*. Love God; love your neighbor as yourself. But…how? Whom? More questions.

In this final "debate" with the Pharisees, they ask which commandment is THE greatest. Jesus, perhaps an Anglican before his time, gives a both/and answer.

Jesus first cites Deuteronomy 6:5, the second half of the Shema, the bedrock creedal statement of Judaism. *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* These are words that every Jew knows. But Jesus doesn't stop there.

[1] Andrew McGowan, *What's the Question?* July 24, 2020.

When he quotes Leviticus 19:18, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*, he establishes an interpretive lens that announces his own faith and shapes ours forever. Because these two verses shape our faith, it's worth a short walk through some words that might get lost in translation: love, heart, soul, and might. Our tour guide today is my classmate The Rev. Dr. Becky Wright, who recently retired from teaching Hebrew and Old Testament at The University of the South. Any missteps are due to user error on my part.

Our first stop is **love**. In this case, love is not about emotion or romantic love. The Hebrew verb could better be translated "be loyal." Emotions cannot be commanded; loyalty can be. So, we have

"You shall be loyal to the Lord your God…"

The next stop is **Heart**. All cultures and languages use body parts figuratively. In English, we "love" in our "heart," maybe to the bottom of it, even though we know the heart pumps blood. In Hebrew, the heart stands for the place of thinking and decision making rather than emotions.

"You shall be loyal to the Lord your God
with all your thoughts and decision making …"

Now, we come to **Soul**. This is trickier for us. The Hebrew word we usually translate as "soul" is *nephesh*. *Nephesh* is what makes something alive, sentient, as distinct, maybe, from a plant; it also makes every individual unique. You may not be able to tell one sparrow from another, but God can.

"You shall be loyal to the Lord your God
with all your thoughts and decision making,
with all your aliveness and uniqueness…"

So, we arrive at **Strength**. We think of strength as an attribute. In Hebrew, it's an adverb, akin to "muchly" or "strongly." Following this commandment takes determination.

"You shall be loyal to the Lord your God
with all your thoughts and decision making,
with all your aliveness and uniqueness,
and work at it."

It's not quite Prayer Book language, but it packs a wallop.

Our next stop is the second "greatest" commandment *love your neighbor as yourself*. You've heard me preach this as "love your neighbor in the same way that you are loved." Lately, though, I've learned that this might not go far enough. This preposition "as" in Hebrew isn't so much to love/be loyal to your neighbor "to the same extent," but rather "be loyal to your neighbor who is as you are." Who is as you are. You can almost hear a mic drop.

The Jews in Matthew's audience would have automatically heard an additional layer of teaching in these words. Because, in Leviticus, the admonition to love neighbor is repeated,

with the same vocabulary, but applied to the alien and the stranger (v. 33). *You shall be loyal to the alien who is as you are.* And, to drive the point home, the verse continues, *for you were aliens in Egypt*.

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Why am I spending all this time today doing a word study? On these words in particular? The reason is to shine a bright light on how Jesus answered this question about the greatest commandment. Matthew tells us that this was the last question they asked him. Like Final Jeopardy, there's a lot riding on the response.

When the lawyer asked which commandment was the greatest, Jesus wasn't choosing from the list of ten that we think of; the Law contains 613 commandments. That Jesus chose Deuteronomy 6:5, *you shall love the Lord your God &c.*, seems like a slam dunk. Then he amplified it with *love your neighbor as yourself*. What if Jesus had chosen, say, something just ten verses away, *you shall not tattoo any marks upon you* (Lev 19:28)? We would have an entirely different religion.

In summing up the Law as he did, Jesus is telling us something important; he is offering to us a lens through which we are called to see and interpret everything. *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* We are called to put an effort into being loyal to God with everything in our God-given humanity; and to honor neighbor and stranger – because we have all been neighbors and strangers.

In this final exchange in the Temple, Jesus is calling us into community, into a community that God desires and dreams for us, into a sense of inclusive humanity rather than the endless and damnable divisions of us and them. With the nonstop news of hatred and violence that fills every waking moment for every person around the planet, the gospel of loving neighbor and stranger because *they are as we are* is more important than ever. Can anything I say from this place cause peace to break out across the globe? I'm guessing not, but perhaps we might start closer to home.

I offer you this thought: you will never look into the eyes of someone God hates. Sit with that for a moment… This is not to say that God approves of those who seem to be in the grip of evil. But they, like we, are loved by the God who made us.

We Episcopalians talk about seeking and serving Christ in all persons. Biblical love is not passive; biblical love is something we do. Loving one's neighbor is, of course, partly about the list of things you all know well: checking in with fellow parishioners, bringing food to a funeral, getting souls to the polls, Trinity Food Ministry, and the like.

Even more importantly, loving one's neighbor is about learning to see everyone else, to see the very next neighbor or stranger, to see their *nephesh* – what makes them human *and* unique, to see them as a child of God. When you do this (and it takes diligence), you help to weave together the human family more tightly. And the question of "how will I survive whatever might happen" becomes "how might we build a new way of being." That new way of being is what we call the Kingdom of God.

Whatever the question, the answer is love, the very essence of God, which is alive and active in this place.

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Jeremy Taylor was an English priest and writer who, somehow, managed to navigate a decade of bloody horrors during the English Civil War. In his book *Holy Living* he wrote, "Love is the greatest thing that God can give us; for God himself is love; and it is the greatest thing we can give to God; for it will also give ourselves and carry with it all that is ours. The apostle [Paul] calls it the band of perfection [Col 3:14]; it is the old, and it is the new, and it is the great commandment, and it is all the commandments; for it is the fulfilling of the law."[2]

Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ says:
You shall be loyal to the Lord your God
with all your thoughts and decision making,
with all your aliveness and uniqueness,
and work at it.
This the first and great commandment.
And the second is like unto it.
You shall be loyal to your neighbor
who is as you are.
On these two commandments
hang all the Law and the Prophets. Amen.

[2] From Jeremy Taylor, *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living* (1650).