

Sermons for Layreaders
Morning Prayer: Lent III
Morning Prayer A

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

First Lesson: Deut 6:1-9, 20-25

Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord your God commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it: That thou mightest fear the Lord thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son's son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it; that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the Lord God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey. Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates. And when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord our God hath commanded you? Then thou shalt say unto thy son, We were Pharaoh's bondmen in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand: And the Lord shewed signs and wonders, great and sore, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his household, before our eyes: And he brought us out from thence, that he might bring us in, to give us the land which he sware unto our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as it is at this day. And it shall be our righteousness, if we observe to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as he hath commanded us."

Second Lesson: 1 Cor 3

"And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye

were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are. Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours; Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's."

Text: Deuteronomy 6: 4-5

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

Body:

When our Lord was asked to give a summary of what God expects of his people, he replied in the words of Holy Scripture. First he quoted Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all

your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Then he added a quote from Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

That’s an excellent summary of the Ten Commandments, because the first four commandments relate to our duty toward God, and the sixth through the tenth relate to our duty toward other people. It is also an excellent summary because it puts everything in positive terms. It requires us to take certain actions and not simply to refrain from certain actions.

Only two of the Ten Commandments are given to Moses in positive terms: “Remember the Sabbath Day” and “Honor your parents.” Everything else is “Thou shalt not, Thou shalt not, Thou shalt not.”

Those are what we call taboos – forbidden actions, – things to be avoided. If you look in the Bible from the latter part of Exodus through Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, you will come across page after page of taboos. So it’s easy to see why many people get the idea that religion is largely a matter of what you don’t do.

I remember one time when I went to see a man who was supposed to be a member of my church. I had never met him because I was new in that parish and I heard that he was chronically ill and unable to come to church. When I got to his house I identified myself and asked to see him, but he would not let me in. He told his wife to tell me that he had not killed anybody and had never stolen anything and had never slept with anyone else’s wife and there were plenty of sinners I should be going to see instead of him. An extreme case, perhaps, but it illustrates how many people have come to think about religion.

It is true, of course, that there are certain things you as a Christian are forbidden to do. You may not hate anyone, even someone who has hurt you. You may not gossip or spread evil reports about people even if they are true. You may not take unfair advantage of someone who is not as strong or as smart as you. And certainly you must observe the eight “Thou shalt nots” enumerated in the Ten Commandments.

But Jesus knew that Old Testament religion at its best is a positive religion, and He was not nearly as concerned with the many prohibitions and restrictions as He was with the active thrust of a person’s life and the positive actions that result.

Jesus told a story about a man who was delivered from the clutches of a demon. All the evil was cast of this man's life. The old habits were purged. His soul was made spotless. But the demon returned, and, finding the man's soul completely empty, he moved back in and took over again and even brought some other demons with him.

The point of that story is that if the man had filled his life with positive virtues, there would have been no room for the demon to come back in. Those of you who are successful gardeners know that just getting out the weeds and the crabgrass is not enough. You know that bare ground is an invitation for the weeds and the crabgrass to return.

So you fill in those bare spots with healthy plants. St. Benedict makes the same point in writing about Lent. He says that Lent is not primarily a time for putting things out of your life. It is primarily a time for bringing things into your life. You may have to move something out in order to make room for something better, but it is futile to give up candy or cigarettes or anything else unless you bring in something that has religious value to replace it.

Simply creating a vacuum invites all sorts of insidious evils: pride, self-righteousness, small mindedness, grouchiness, even hypocrisy, which Jesus roundly condemns. What God really wants from us is not passivity but positive commitment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment."² And the second is not only like it but derives from it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

We are required as Christians not only to show up for church but to give glory to God in everything we do in church as well as out. We are required as Christians to receive with thanksgiving the Body and Blood of Christ and also to testify to his death and resurrection. We are required as Christians to pray for each other and to forgive each other and to ask forgiveness for our own misdoings. We are required as Christians to be generous to the poor, and to visit the sick and to comfort the dying and the bereaved. We are required as Christians to pray for our enemies and for those in authority over us as well as for ourselves and for each other.

We are also required to pass our faith on to the next generation. Listen again to Deuteronomy:

“And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the street. Have them tattooed on your hands and on your forehead. Write them on the doors and walls of your house.”

Keep them before you in your consciousness at all times. Of course, we cannot take all that literally, especially the part about the tattoos, but I tell you this. If the church is going to grow or even survive it will not be because of what happens here on Sunday. It will be because of what happens out there all the other days of the week.

I’m convinced that there is not enough conversation in our homes about religious matters and not nearly enough conversation about theology at the dinner table with our families. As we go about our daily business we do not reflect enough on what the Lord might have to say about what we are doing and how we are doing it and why we are doing it and what we might be doing instead.

I will also say this about teaching the Lord’s ways to our children and our grandchildren. They will listen to what we say, and they will also watch what we do. If they sense a disconnect between the two, they will turn us off immediately. Young people are like Jesus in this respect. They can forgive us, and are glad to forgive us when we are weak and when we make mistakes and when we fail to live up to our obligations, provided we acknowledge these faults for what they are. But the one thing young people cannot abide is hypocrisy. They insist on integrity.

It’s fine to bring children to Sunday school, and when we get our building that’s one of the first things we have to do, but the real learning takes place in the way we live our lives every day.

Now I know I’m not telling you anything that you don’t already know. I’m just reminding you that there’s a lot more to biblical religion than what you must not do. They are positive duties that are required of us, and they demand our full commitment to them every day of the week.

“The first commandment is this. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Everything in the law and the prophets depends on doing those things.”

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*St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
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1 Matt. 12:43-45.

2 Matt. 22:37-38 (RSV); cf., Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:27a.

3 Matt. 22:39b (RSV); cf., Mark 12:31b and 10:27b.