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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
October 25, 2020
Year A, Proper 25, Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2
[Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18](#)
[Psalm 1](#)
[1 Thessalonians 2:1-8](#)
[Matthew 22:34-46](#)

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There's a story about two great rabbis who lived just a bit before Jesus. A Gentile came to Rabbi Shammai and said, "I'd like to convert to your faith, but I want you to teach me the whole Torah during the time I can stand on one foot." Shammai drove him away with a stick. So next he went to Rabbi Hillel. And Hillel agreed to do it. He said, "Don't do to your neighbor what is hateful to yourself—that's the whole Torah; the rest is commentary." And the Gentile converted.¹

There are lots of examples of teachers simplifying the whole of the Law into a summary. Jesus is no exception. In another place in Matthew's gospel he summarizes the Law in almost the same way as Hillel: Do to others as you would want them to do to you. Here today he chooses a different approach by picking two verses from the Torah. One is from the book of Deuteronomy: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength. And the second is from the book of Leviticus, from the passage we read today: Love your neighbor as yourself.

It's been said that these two verses sum up the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of faith. Vertical, in the sense of our relationship with God; horizontal, in the sense of our relationship with one another. And clearly we need both to practice a life of faith.

Three years ago when I was first exploring applying to serve here at Incarnation I studied the parish's written profile. On the first page was a word cloud, a collage of words used by parishioners to describe the church. Some of the biggest words were *liturgy, music, beauty, spiritual*. Words about transcendence, about the vertical. And some of the other biggest were *outreach, caring, inclusive*. Words about the horizontal, about our relationships with each other. That's one of the things that drew me to Incarnation and that I still believe is who we are at our best: a church passionately devoted to the love of God in beauty and prayer, and to the love of our neighbors by helping make sure people have food and shelter and support. Both those dimensions need each other. A church with the most beautiful liturgy in the world that doesn't care for its neighbors isn't so much a church as a shrine, or a museum. A church that feeds and shelters people but doesn't pray or sing is more of

¹ *Mishnah Shabbat* 31a.

a social service agency. We need museums, and we need social service agencies—but our call is to be a church.

Now in the end you can distinguish between the horizontal and the vertical, but you really can't separate them. Last week in his sermon Jamie Knutsen said that every human being bears the image of God. So actually, if you are to love God with your heart and mind and strength that means loving God's image in others with your heart and mind and strength. And a few chapters from where we are now in Matthew's gospel Jesus will tell his friends that however they treat those who are poor or hungry or in need is how they are treating him. So if we are loving our neighbor as ourself, that means we are loving Jesus Christ the incarnate Word of God as ourself in the person of our neighbor. Loving God means loving neighbor, loving neighbor means loving God.

And notice the word those two commandments have in common. *Love*. Think about what it means to be commanded to *love*. In a way it's a total paradox because love is the one thing we can never be forced to do. Jesus could have said *serve* the Lord your God with your heart and mind and strength, and *serve* your neighbor as you'd want to be served. But you can serve someone without loving them. You can be coerced into serving. But no one can coerce you into loving. Love comes freely, or it's not love. Jesus says almost exactly the same thing in a different way in the Gospel of John on the night of the Last Supper when he says to his disciples, "I am giving you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you." So across different gospel traditions we have a very clear insistence from Jesus that the one central thing God wants us to do is love. Not do a specific thing. Not carry out a specific duty. But love: love God, and love all those whom God loves.

What would the world look like if we really believed love is at the heart of the universe? What would this country look like?

What does love look like here and now when there is such cruelty, racism, corruption, contempt for truth, blatant attempts to destabilize the democratic process? When there is a raging pandemic we have failed to contain; when there is a changing climate that threatens the welfare of our entire world; when there are five hundred young children still separated from their deported parents; when our society is profoundly divided into sides with incompatible understandings of reality; what would it look like to love one another as we are loved by God?

I think there's a clue back in our passage from Leviticus where that instruction to love your neighbor as yourself comes from. The line leading up to it says, "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin." And then it goes on to say, "You shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself." And then it says, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people." Think about that. On the one hand we are not to bear hatred in our heart against anyone. Not our

worst political enemy. We're not to take vengeance or bear a grudge. But in case we're tempted to think this is about just being nice—God also says “You shall reprove your neighbor of wrongdoing or else you'll carry the guilt yourself.” Loving our neighbor doesn't mean excusing their bad actions. It means loving them enough to not let them off the hook, to not be satisfied with them failing to live up to the image of God in them.

We are coming up to the most consequential election, I think, of my lifetime, and maybe of yours. There is a lot of hatred among us and there is a lot to reprove. If you're a citizen of this country, I urge you to practice love for God and neighbor by exercising your ability to vote. You can go do it now. If you haven't registered to vote, you can still register on the spot when you cast your ballot, either in early voting or on Election Day. And as you vote, hold in your heart the commandment of love. Vote for candidates and policies who will move the world in the direction of more love rather than less. Do not take vengeance. Do not hate your neighbor in your heart. Instead let your heart burn with the fire of love. A fierce love that refuses to settle for anything less than the full humanity of all who are loved in the image of God.