

Love your neighbor

Proper 25A, October 29, 2023, St. Matthew's, Sunbury
Leviticus 19:1-2; 15-18; Psalm 1;1 Thessalonians 2:1-8;
Matthew 22: 34-46

The Reverend Dina Carter Ishler, Priest in Charge

In the name of God~ Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Amen.

Our family recently honored the eighth anniversary of my mother's death. She was a natural shepherd- her entire life centered around shepherding her family, her friends, other peoples' children, all animals, God's creation...the list is endless.

Her love language was giving. Food-how she loved offering gifts of food. If you moved, or had a baby, or a death in your family, you'd get a dish of her Amazing Macaroni and Cheese... the same recipe from the back of the box we all use but somehow a million times more delicious. Or scalloped potatoes from scratch, or homemade strawberry shortcakes- maybe all of the above.

Like the rest of us, my mother could be opinionated at times- but that didn't stop her from showing her love by her actions. She may not have approved of something you'd said, or choices you'd made, but you'd still get a home-cooked meal and a hand-written card with "just a little something" in it. Where she saw need, love became the only thing worth preserving- everything else was pruned away and she was free to offer this love with a generous and open spirit. Even more powerful than these specific acts of caring was her understanding of what was most important: *loving one's neighbor by seeing the need of the present moment and responding to it.*

In today's Gospel we meet Jesus doing this very same thing. A lawyer, a Pharisee, tries to provoke him by asking: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus replies, concisely and clearly: "***You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and***

with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Rooted in his own Jewish heritage, Jesus goes right to the heart of the matter with quotations from the Torah that would have been familiar to his audience, bringing forward from past teachings what is most crucial to a communal life together *in any age*: that our life’s work of loving our neighbors rests squarely on the foundation of our love for God.

This well-known statement of Jesus’ calls us to a way of life that appears direct and simple on the surface- and yet the lifelong work of loving is far more complicated. So much is thrown at us that competes for our limited energy and attention, challenging us constantly as to how we will live with these two great commandments as the heart of all we say and do. We know that as baptized and

believing people our whole being is to be given over to a love for God that encompasses all that we are- heart, soul, mind, body, strength- and that this love transforms us and calls us to love all others, including ourselves- *how often do we find it hardest of all to love ourselves!* We know we cannot faithfully love a God we do not see while neglecting or ignoring the needs of our fellow human beings that are right before our eyes- yet the fact remains there are so many ways to love that we often wonder where to even begin. As the Apostle Paul says in today's epistle, we are to care so deeply for each other that we are as tender as a nurse caring for her own children- this is no easy task, and yet it is at the heart of what it means to love, woven as it is into how we love each other as the moment demands of us.

During our diocesan convention last weekend, we spent thoughtful and prayerful time wondering about a **possible- this is the important word here-** reunification

with our neighboring diocese of Bethlehem. There was a time when our two dioceses were one- hence the word reunification- and all the dioceses used to have different names- so this is really a conversation about how we can best love and serve God's people in this place and in our time. Various speakers shared with us about the unique ministries and resources that each diocese could possibly share with the other- our thriving diaper pantry is a good example of this- believing that we are stronger when we pool our gifts and experiences to bless and care for the needs of our neighbors. We were also asked to remember that not only the Episcopal Church, but most other faith communities are vastly different than just a few decades ago- but our table of St. Matthew's delegates and guests and myself we held fast to our belief that statistics on a graph *cannot fully measure who we are as the Body of Christ alive and at work in the world.* I will tell you a story that made this truth spring to life for me.

Heading to our hotel room Friday night, Patrick and I were carrying not only our bags but our own St. Matthew's cross to be used in the convention service of Holy Eucharist. A man and woman on the elevator with us struck up a conversation when they noticed us carrying this large cross, remarking on how important they believed faith communities to be in today's world. As they reached their door, the woman said: "I wish I had not lost my faith", and she started to cry. She shared that her daughter had died recently and God felt so far away, that her efforts to find peace and meaning and hope again had not yet brought her anything but emptiness.

My friends, I cannot possibly tell this story in such a way that the absolute holiness of this encounter comes alive for you, but I can tell you that I put down my bags so I could be fully present to her in this thin space of raw vulnerability. We remembered together how hard it is to be a human being because our souls and bodies know

such tremendous pain when someone we love is no longer physically with us- when we wonder where God is while our hearts are breaking. We talked about how a God who has promised to always be our God, dwelling with us since before any human being was created, wants nothing more than for us to move towards healing and wholeness- not only in the world to come, but in our own slow and painful journeys back towards light and life when darkness feels so absolute we think we will never see beauty or hope again. We talked, as I so often do in holy conversations like these, how at the Fraction when I break the bread we are so visibly reminded that we love and worship a God who gave God's Son to live among us *in a human body like ours*- one that knew suffering and utter brokenness in order that our own brokenness might have the life that really is life. And with her permission I anointed her and prayed that powerful prayer I love to pray with you all in our own moments of longing for healing: "I lay my hands upon you in the name of our

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, beseeching him to fill you and uphold you with his grace, that you might know the healing power of his love.”

The four of us were together in that hotel hallway an hour or more- I don't know exactly how long. I only know that it was holy ground and God was fully present with us there. And when we said farewell, we marveled at how good it is to pay attention to where the Spirit is calling us, spaces of healing and love: we had debated bringing the Cross in that night, or just getting it the next morning. And they had been waiting for another elevator but we urged them to join us- “I was meant to get on this elevator!” she said through her tears. “This conversation was meant to happen.”

I believe, beloveds, with all my soul, that **this** is what loving one's neighbor looks like. Made in the image and likeness of God, grounded in the truth of scripture,

nourished as we are by a sacramental life that brings us ever closer to the heart of God and each other, called to a life of service to our communities and our world: at the center of all this is the invitation to be fully present with each other and what the moment asks of us, in this place and in our time. As faithful people, we need to remember that what matters the most is right in front of us *and it is not something we can measure on a chart*: it is love at the center of everything we do, love that sees and honors God's uniquely beloved people because as we love them we are also loving God. *God has placed us in this particular time and place for a reason*- my prayer for each of us is that we keep on loving each other and the world outside our doors with these moments of loving presence as the heart of everything we do, because we know this is the work we've been called to do with gladness and singleness of heart. **Amen.**

