



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Second Sunday after Trinity
June 14, 2015

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

The passage selected for the Sermon this morning comes from the Gospel reading we use to open the Mass:

“Thou shalt love the Lord the God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment, And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets.”

Taken together, the Gospel and the Epistle today amplify the “great commandment” which we recite to start our Eucharist. We are to love Our Lord God with all our soul and strength and mind, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The parable about the rich man and the feast reflect our duty to God, and the Epistle explains how The Spirit fills us when we do right by our duty to God by enabling us to love each other. The message is simple and direct, and yet, we are not really satisfied by the commandment. What we want to know is, “How much do we have to love God?” and “who exactly are these neighbors, and how often do we have to love them?”

To love God and to love our neighbor are antithetical to our human nature, a nature that is legalistic and measured. We want to know how far over the speed limit we can drive before we trigger the flashing lights, and set our accelerators just below. In our spiritual lives, we want to know how often we have to come to Church, how much we should put in the basket, whether we can choose to love only the people on our side of the Church or who attend our service. All our lives, when faced with doing the things we don't want to do, we have responded with, “how much of that do I have to do?” instead of following the example of the Mary, when she responded to Gabriel, “thy will be done.” This inclination to keep score is our Biblical inheritance. Cain thought he could get away with giving less than his best to God, and then tried to

fixed the problem by killing his brother who gave more. Jacob kept score with Esau over birthright and with Laban over the years he had to work to earn Rebecca. Solomon, for all his wisdom, couldn't find a balance that let him keep his duty to God, while letting his wives worship their idols. The Good Samaritan parable is triggered by a follower who questioned exactly who were these ‘brothers’ he was being told to love, because Jesus couldn't possibly mean everyone. Peter wanted to know how many times we have to forgive. It is easy to see how we come by this false belief that there is a scorecard, or some cosmic scale, and that if we can just manage to do more good than evil, that we can pass the entrance exam at St. Peter's gate.

God, however, does not judge us that way. In His mercy and understanding, God knows that we can never do enough good things to earn our way to heaven. The greatest saints, our Biblical heroes, were flawed men and women who committed sins we wouldn't dream of committing. And yet, they were judged as worthy, because they were loved by God, and they did their best to reflect that love to their families, their friends, to the world.

God judges our hearts, and not our actions. Intention matters to God. He wants us to do our best, to cooperate with the grace of the Holy Ghost to do what we understand could never be enough, and yet is still offered with thanksgiving and humility. That is the message of the readings this morning.

In the Gospel, Jesus is speaking to the legalistic culture of the Pharisees. The Feast that he describes is the inheritance of the Jews, to be the first fruits of God's creation, to be the blessing to all people. The temporal and worldly representation of that blessing, of the Covenant between God and His people, is the Sabbath. God calls His people to keep the Sabbath with their hearts. He knows they

can't really be as faithful as He calls them to be, and so, through the Law, he gives them room, excuses He will accept because He is merciful.

The excuses written into the Law were the same examples Jesus relates as the excuses used to bypass the Feast. Checking out the new property, trying the new farm equipment (oxen), and consummating the marriage bed were legitimate excuses for breaking the Sabbath. Yet, in this parable, Jesus invalidates the law, He voids the excuses, and calls those who use them to judgment, and to harsh judgment. Was Jesus arbitrarily changing the rules on the Pharisees? Do we serve a God who is so random that we can't trust what He tells us from day to day?

No. The reason these men were brought to judgment and condemned was because of the hardness of their hearts. They were willing to take advantage of the loopholes in the Law for their own benefit, but they were demanding and harsh judges of the poor, the defenseless, the disadvantaged, the unclean. God had given them room to maneuver around His Law, and they refused to return that kindness, using that same law to exclude those who weren't as well off as they were. They used that Law to judge the people that Jesus brought to them as unworthy of the Covenant privileges. They even presumed to use that Law, which was authored in Love by Jesus through Moses, to judge Jesus Himself. Because they corrupted the Law, which is a Law of Mercy, and made it a Law of exclusion and pride, they were judged and condemned by the same law.

As the Gospel explains how God judges the way we worship Him, the Epistle explains the way He judges that second part of the great commandment, that we love our neighbors as ourselves. Regular attendance at Church, tithing, saying the daily office, dedicating hours to prayer are all important, but without charity, without love for each other, they are nothing more than clanging cymbals, chiming bells, just noise in the ears of God.

St. John tells us just how seriously God takes the second part of His great commandment.

"He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him."

The meaning of this verse is clear. We can't be loving our brothers some of the time. We can't be loving just some of our brothers. Our commitment to charity, and forgiveness, and kindness isn't measured on a scale, it isn't the sum of our successes against the weight of our sins. It is the

state of our heart. Unless we have hearts that reflect the love that God has given us to the people that He has also given us, then we have no life. No life means both; no comfort and peace in this life, and, no part in eternal life.

If our judgment were based on that absolute scale, if we measured our lives the way we judge others, then we would have to despair. There is no way our scale comes up empty on the unmoving, unforgiving and uncharitable side of the scale. But God is not like us, and His judgment is not our justice. Instead of condemning us for our inevitable shortcoming, He sent His Son to stand for our Judgment, and because He could not help but love His Son, who would only do His Father's will, He forgives us, and gives us the Holy Spirit so that we can be sanctified, so that we can be transformed by that Spirit into hearts that can keep His commandment.

"And this is His commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in Him, and He in him."

How is it that God comes to live in us so that we can live in Him? How is it that we can become creatures with hearts that can be judged worthy of eternal life? The answer is it happens by the sacraments. By Baptism, we are restored to the nature which were created to inherit, the Nature of Jesus Christ, the Nature of children of God. That Nature grows in us, transforms us throughout our lives, so that our hearts can become loving, Godly hearts. Through Communion, we receive the very life of Christ to dwell in us by the power of the Holy Spirit; to fortify us in that transformation. As the life of Christ transforms us, the heart of pride and greed and fear that is destined to the judgment of damnation and the withering of death, becomes a heart of love, a heart that can endure through this life, a heart that ultimately can transcend judgment and death, that can stand to be in the Light and Love of the Father forever.

So as we come to the altar this morning, Let us come with humility and thanksgiving that we are not judged by our failings, but judged with mercy, that we are transformed instead of tried. And let us pray that we will be so moved by the Holy spirit in the week to come, that we will overflow that gift by leading lives of forgiveness, kindness and love, reflecting the gift of the Holy Spirit that allows us to live and keep the great commandment.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen