Proper 25A

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St. Dunstan's

The Rev. Patricia Templeton

Love God, Vote

Today's gospel reading is one of a string of stories in Matthew where the religious authorities are questioning Jesus, trying to trap him into saying something wrong or heretical.

Today it's the turn of a religious leader who is also a lawyer. Fittingly, his question is about the Jewish law.

"Which commandment is the greatest?" he asks.

Jesus doesn't hesitate. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," he says. "This is the greatest and first commandment."

Jesus doesn't stop there. "A second is like unto it," he adds. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

One might wonder why Jesus didn't stop with the first commandment, loving God with all one's being. After all, that is what the lawyer asked.

But Jesus knows that without the second commandment the first one can easily become abstract and meaningless.

How do you show your love for God?

We might answer by attending worship, praying, and studying scripture. And all of those are good things, essential to a life of faith.

However, Jesus knows that piety alone is not the answer to loving God. In fact, in other places in the gospels Jesus warns against those who make public displays of piety.

Love of God is not an abstract, disembodied thing, separate from the rest of our live.

Love for God is expressed in how we treat our neighbors, Jesus says. The two commandments are inseparable.

First John puts it this way: "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen."

Love God, love your neighbor. As Jesus says, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

In other words, if you follow these two commandments you don't need to worry about anything else.

But I can hear the inner lawyer in all of us asking, "What does Jesus mean by love? And who, exactly, is our neighbor?"

The kind of love that Jesus is speaking of is not an emotion. It is a concern for and commitment to the well being of the other. It's what our baptismal covenant means when we promise to respect the dignity of all people, and to work for justice and peace.

Love here is an action, not a feeling.

Philosopher and activist Cornel West says, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

And neighbor does not only mean loving the people next door or across the street, or the people in our family or church or tribe. It means recognizing every person as a child of God, no matter how different from us they may be, and no matter where they live.

Love God, love your neighbor.

It sounds so simple, but it has profound implications for how we are to live.

In the midst of the chaos and turmoil of this year, I can think of two simple ways for us to show love for our neighbor.

The easiest in the midst of this pandemic is to wear a mask. Wear it whenever we're in public. Wear it every time we are in contact with anyone beyond the members of our household.

A study released this week shows that if we all wore masks when in contact with others that 130,000 lives would likely be saved in the next three months.

And yet wearing them remains controversial.

Wearing a mask in not an infringement of our rights or a political statement. Masks show that we care about the people with whom we come in contact, whether we know them or not.

We wear masks to show our love for God by loving our neighbors.

A prayer to say when putting on a mask puts it this way:

"As I prepare to go into the world, help me to see the sacrament in the wearing of this cloth -- let it be an outward sign of an inward grace -- a tangible and visible way of living love for my neighbors."

The controversy over wearing masks shows that following the two great commandments may be more complicated than we at first imagine.

The second way we have right now to show our love for God and neighbor is something that many of you have already done, and that I hope the rest of you will do in the next nine days.

That is to vote.

We often hear that voting is our civic duty. And it is.

But it also is a primary way of expressing our faith.

"Voting is an act of moral discernment and decision," our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says. "It is how a community or a nation decides how the moral values it holds and shares shape public policy and the lives of the children of God."

When Christians decide for whom to vote we should not only be asking which candidate best serves our own interests. We should also be asking which candidate best serves our neighbors.

No candidate is perfect, of course. And even the best intentions and policies can be waylaid.

But as I vote I ask these questions:

Which candidate best serves our neighbors by making sure all Americans have access to affordable and decent health care?

Which candidate best serves our neighbors by having a true, science-based plan to control the pandemic, and a plan to help those whose livelihoods have been affected?

Which candidate understands and acknowledges the long history of systemic racism in this country and works to improve the lives and insure the safety of Black Americans, showing that their lives really do matter?

Which sees LGBTQ Americans as children of God and citizens of this country who deserve every right afforded to straight Americans?

Which is committed to helping improve the lives of hard-working people at the bottom of the socio-economic scale?

Which is concerned about climate change and caring for this earth on which all of our neighbors live?

Which offers a compassionate and humane immigration policy?

These are the questions former Alaska Bishop Steven Charleston was thinking of when he was asked for whom he would vote.

"Here is my answer," he wrote. "I will be voting for the poor. I will be voting for the homeless, for the hungry, for the elders who cannot afford their health care. I will be voting for the single moms, for the day laborers, and for the kids in school.

"I am voting for the wetlands, the rivers and the sea, the forests and all the creatures who live there. When I go in to check someone's name, I will be voting for all of the above."

Charleston will be voting for his neighbors.

For Christians these are our questions and concerns as we vote. Our answers may be different, but our concerns should be the same.

Love God. Love your neighbor.

Wear a mask. Vote.

Amen.