

GOD'S LOVE IS FIRST

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
October 31, 2021

Then the scribe said to Jesus, "You are right, Teacher ... to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Mark 12:32-33)

If you paid attention in your 9th grade English class, you may recall the unit on Greek mythology, including the story of the doomed Sisyphus. Sisyphus was the first King of Ephyra, later known as Corinth. He was a crafty fellow who had insufficient respect for the gods, and he cheated death twice. First, Sisyphus had interfered with one of Zeus' latest schemes for an illicit love affair. As punishment, Zeus condemned the meddlesome king to the underworld, where Thanatos – otherwise known as death – was to secure the chains that forever would bind the new captive. Sisyphus pretended to be curious about how the chains worked and asked if he might inspect them. When Thanatos foolishly agreed, Sisyphus pulled the old switcheroo, put Thanatos in fetters, and escaped. With Thanatos immobilized no one could die, which made Aries, the god of war, very angry indeed.

Sisyphus cheated death a second time when he was an old man. He instructed his wife that upon his death she should leave his body in a public square, unburied. When Sisyphus arrived at the underworld he convinced Hades that he should be allowed to return to earth in order to scold his wife for not giving him a proper burial. "I'll be right back, I promise," said Sisyphus. Of course, Sisyphus did not return. But by now the gods had had enough of the wily king. They condemned him to the underworld again, this time for good, and gave him a particularly onerous task. For all eternity Sisyphus was to roll a great boulder to the top of a hill. The problem was, every time he managed to reach the summit the boulder would roll back down again, and Sisyphus would have to start from the beginning. Day after day, year after year, Sisyphus was to perform the repetitive task, laboring in futility, never accomplishing anything.

Certain aspects of today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (12:28-34) have reminded me of Sisyphus, and if you hang with me you may find out why. Mark tells us about Jesus in the Jerusalem temple, just a few days after what we call Palm Sunday. On Palm Sunday Jesus had entered the city with such fanfare that many were suspecting he was God's promised Messiah, that figure foretold by the prophets who would lead the Jews to victory over their oppressors. In the succeeding days Jesus made his way to the temple and engaged in debate with the Jewish religious authorities: Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes. Many of the exchanges were hostile, with the clerics trying to entrap Jesus and expose him as a fraud. But what Mark records today is entirely different, even cordial in comparison to the verbal sparring matches that seemed to await Jesus around every corner.

A scribe who had been admiring how Jesus handled himself asked a real question, not a trick question: "*Which commandment is the first of all?*" In reply Jesus drew from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:1-9), the very passage we heard as our Old Testament reading today. He repeated the Shema, which every Jew would have known as central to their life and faith: "*The first commandment is this ... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*" Then, to the Shema Jesus added a commandment from Leviticus (19:18) and bound the two together essentially as one: "*The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe was duly impressed by how Jesus succinctly summarized all the law and the prophets. "Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. You are right, Teacher.

You have spoken truly,” said the scribe. Then he added an interesting comment: *“this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* Remember, the setting is the temple, and the time is Passover. The temple would have been a beehive of activity as thousands of Jewish pilgrims from around the countryside arrived to offer animal sacrifices in the hope that God would forgive their sins and smile upon them. Business was booming at the temple. The crush of people at the moneychangers’ booths, all the noises and smells of a vast stockyard, and priests at their altars offering the sacrifices was the chaotic backdrop to the conversation between Jesus and the scribe. The scribe took it all in and declared that the words of Jesus were better, more important, more in harmony with what God wants from us. Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Do this and it will go well with you and your children. You will prosper in the land flowing with milk and honey. It’s that simple. What great, good news.

The problem is that the summary of the law is easier said than done. Some neighbors can be difficult to love. And as for God, many people these days are not even sure that God exists. So the greater challenge for these folks is first to believe in God before they can consider what it means to love God. Others have decided that they cannot love God or the idea of God. In fact they hate God because of our perilous human predicament and the state of the world.

Hating God sounds severe, so much so that you might be surprised to know who, at one point in his life, found himself approaching the mindset and about to cross over into it. In the early 16th century, Martin Luther was a priest and a monk in Germany. He was a scholar and a university professor. He was a rising star in the church, diligent in prayer, fasting, and acts of self-denial. “If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I,” he said.¹ Yet for all his institutional credentials Luther could not shake the notion of God’s displeasure. Business was booming in the church, but all the Masses he offered according to the Roman rite and theology felt like Sisyphus rolling the great boulder up the hill. Because Luther himself and all of humankind kept sinning, the boulder would roll back down to the bottom every time, leaving us to start all over again from the beginning. Pleasing God was a futile task, yet God through the church demanded the performance of the ritual, world without end.

In his extensive study of the Scriptures, Luther would focus on numerous passages that commanded us to do what could not be done. *You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,* said Jesus (Matthew 5:48). *Happy are they whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord ... who never do any wrong,* sang the Psalmist (119:1-8), and the choir today. He particularly stumbled over Romans 1:17, which reads, *the righteous shall live by faith.* Luther took the verse to mean that only the righteous – only those who had achieved the impossible – could have the faith sufficient to be in a right relationship with God. Only the righteous could have peace with God. Luther hated the concept of God’s righteousness because it was unattainable to mortals. Love God? Luther was finding it easier to resent God – even hate God for requiring us to do what could not be done, and then punishing us for not doing it. Something was wrong with the picture of God that institutional faith was presenting to the world. On this, Luther looking at the church and Jesus looking at the temple would have agreed. Something was wrong with the picture, but what was wrong?

You may have seen a recent news story about the great state of Ohio. I love Ohio. Stacie and I were married there, and it’s the birthplace of our two sons. Ohio also claims to be the birthplace of aviation because the Wright brothers lived and worked in Dayton. Frankly, I’ve always found the claim to be a bit spurious because the first flight took place in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Nevertheless, Ohio presses on with its claim and just released a new license plate depicting the Wright brother’s plane pulling a banner behind it that reads, Ohio: Birthplace of Aviation. They had already printed 35,000 of the plates before someone pointed out that something was wrong with the picture. It was backwards. The banner was in front of the plane, not behind it. Oops!

Likewise, Luther's breakthrough moment (or moments) came when he realized that the picture of salvation presented by the medieval church was backwards. The banner was in front of the plane. Or, truer to Luther's time, the cart was in front of the horse. We don't earn the righteousness of God through hard work, moral effort, clean living, and religious devotion. It is futile to try. Rather, the righteousness of God is a gift that God gives, or imputes to us through the merits of Christ. The work of Christ on the cross was sufficient for all time. As our Eucharistic prayer today puts it, on the cross Jesus *made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.* Those are Cranmer's words, not Luther's, but Luther certainly would have approved. What it means to say is that Jesus rolled the stone up the hill and set it in place once and for all. It will never roll down again. It is finished. We can trust – we can have faith – in the love of God and the forgiveness of our sins. Having faith and trust in what Jesus has done, not what we do, justifies us. *Therefore, since we are justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,* wrote St. Paul in his letter to the Romans (5:1).

When Luther finally realized that God first loves us, loving God and loving our neighbors in response became not onerous, impossible tasks, but sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit was the engine of salvation. God's love comes first. Good deeds, works of charity, religious devotion, fasting, praying, self-denial, and all the other business of the church is a response of gratitude to God who first loves us. Far from doing away with works of love, we do them with a new motivation, even a new fire. We do them because God loves us, not in order to make God love us. Luther wrote of the moment he saw the picture of salvation as it was meant to be, *"Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise through gates that had been flung open."*

You may be wondering why I have devoted a substantial chunk of a Sunday sermon to Martin Luther. Well, today is what many churches call Reformation Sunday. It was 504 years ago today, on October 31, 1517 when Luther went public with his *95 Theses* disputing the abuses of Papal indulgences. Undergirding his argument was the theology that we are justified by faith. Legend has it that Luther nailed the document to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg on this day. I don't mean to burst any bubbles, but Luther himself never claimed to do such a thing. The story was first circulated long after Luther's death by his younger colleague, Philipp Melancthon, who himself wasn't even in Wittenberg in 1517. What likely happened is that on this day Luther mailed multiple copies of the *95 Theses* to various church officials and fellow scholars. The current scholarly consensus seems to be that the *95 Theses* were mailed, not nailed.

I leave it to you to debate it around the water cooler with your office colleagues tomorrow (impressing others with your knowledge of church trivia can only make you more popular). Either way, whether nailed or mailed or both, the word spread, the notion that we are justified by faith and not by works shook the world, and the Protestant Reformation was off and running. Anglicanism is a daughter church of the movement that Luther sparked. In fact, for the past generation the Episcopal Church has enjoyed an agreement of full communion with certain branches of the Lutheran Church.

The doomed figure of Sisyphus was an ancient story even in the days of Jesus. Whether or not Jesus and the friendly scribe had ever heard the tale is something we will never know. But it could be that Martin Luther was familiar with the legend. In any case, all three would help us see that such does not have to be our fate. God's love for us comes first and is securely in place. The wonder of living then becomes figuring out how to love God in return, and enjoy God forever. *"This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices,"* said the scribe to Jesus. And in reply Jesus said, *"You are not far from the kingdom of God."*

+

¹ This quote, and other information about Martin Luther is found in *Christian History*, Issue 34 (Vol. XI, No. 2), 1992.