

Collect of the Day

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament: Deuteronomy 6:1-9

1 Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, 2so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. 3Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. 5You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.8Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, 9and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Psalm: Psalm 119:1-8

1 Happy are they whose way is blameless, *
who walk in the law of the Lord!

2 Happy are they who observe his decrees *
and seek him with all their hearts!

3 Who never do any wrong, *
but always walk in his ways.

4 You laid down your commandments, *
that we should fully keep them.

5 Oh, that my ways were made so direct *
that I might keep your statutes!
6 Then I should not be put to shame, *
when I regard all your commandments.
7 I will thank you with an unfeigned heart, *
when I have learned your righteous judgments.
8 I will keep your statutes; *
do not utterly forsake me.

Epistle: Hebrews 9:11-14

11 But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), 12he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. 13For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, 14how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

Gospel: Mark 12:28-34

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' 29Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." 31The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' 32Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; 33and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbour as oneself",—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' 34When

Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God. 'After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Freedom and Responsibility

According to the Biblical Narrative, with Freedom comes Responsibility. Moses brought the children of Israel from Slavery to Freedom into the Promised Land. But Moses is not known as the Liberator in Salvation History as much as he is the Law Giver.

He brought the Stone Tablets down from Sinai and we have enshrined them in our hearts as the Ten Commandments. The Episcopal Church requires that we know them by heart when we prepare for our Confirmation, that along with the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. This is the kernel of a faith to live by.

As the Children of Israel wandered the desert for forty years a whole corpus of Law developed. Altogether 613 laws were adopted which gave good order to the life of the community.

But of all the Laws in Mosaic tradition none was greater than the "Shema", which we read in today's first lesson. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The word "Shema" is of course Hebrew for "Listen!"

Which brings me to a story. Since the last time I saw you there is COVID. It has changed so much of what we used to take for granted. Now we have to wear masks, practice social distance, keep our hands clean, get vaccinated and otherwise be vigilant for our well being as well as that of others around us. The health and very survival of those we love is at stake.

Many are irritated at all these rules. But my grandmother lived through the Influenza Pandemic of 1918. The way she told the story, it was a

dreadful time. We lost many loved ones then, and it was because of her experience that she insisted we wash our hands often, but not just to wash them, we had to scrub them with a brush. We couldn't even come into the house without changing our shoes. She didn't want us tracking God knows what into our home. All the while, she severely intoned the words; "Cleanliness is next to Godliness."

What we are going through now is nothing new in human experience. Plague and pestilence has been the collective experience of humankind down through the ages, and the only through the heroic work of science have we been able to spare humanity of some of the worst suffering. In my own lifetime, Jonas Salk and his Polio vaccine saved many a child from paralysis and death. That was a time when few folks questioned the authority and intelligence of our leaders. We also lined up for our smallpox shots. Once they nearly lost me to whooping cough, but then there is a shot for that too now.

How tragic that all this has been politicized now. But it seems almost everything is politicized now.

As for me, I listen to my Grandmother and Science as I would listen to the Shema; "Hear O Israel" only her voice calls out to me to say "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" and "take off your shoes, and scrub your hands. Get your vaccine!" She loved me severely.

One of my parishioners was an epidemiologist. I have always loved science and I was fascinated by his work on the threats out there if any one of scores of viruses gets a toehold in this country. His interest was in some very dangerous possibilities out of South America. I only wish he were here so I could ask him about our current experience with COVID-19. It is as if I can see him shaking his head right now saying, "I tried to tell them". He was very concerned about our preparedness as a nation if a dangerous virus got a start in our midst.

“Hear O Israel!” Listen up! There are laws and they are written for your own good. Freedom does not mean you can do whatever you want to do. Your freedom means that you are responsible to God and to each other for the love of all!

Which of course bring us to the Gospel. The Scribes were arguing, as was their wont about which commandment was the greatest. To Jesus, the answer was obvious. It comes to us from the Deuteronomic Law Code “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” ~*Deuteronomy 6:5*

But then Jesus does something unexpected, he adds a Second Commandment one that is exactly like the first; “love your neighbor as yourself.” Of all the commandments in the Law and the Prophets this is one is right up there front and center. One half of one verse in Leviticus. ~*Leviticus 19:18b*

This commandment obviously complicates what it means to be a Christian. Not only are we to love God, now Jesus insists we love one another also. Can you imagine what that might mean in our political climate? Let's face it, there is some antipathy amongst us when it comes to our political viewpoints. There are times when conversation is barely possible even in our families. God knows, we have to be circumspect around our Thanksgiving tables. Even way back when I was a child, my grandmother begged my uncle not to talk about politics or religion. He'd bristle when she said that and finally he'd say impatiently; “What else is there to talk about! The weather?”

Family feuds are possible. And Jesus is there speaking to us in the midst of our hearts; “Listen! Love God and love one another”.

It's complicated! You bet your life it is complicated. When Presidents talk to Popes or to the G-20 about climate control, trade or peace or to

factions of his own contentious political party, let alone the other, can we forge our way to mutual respect, forbearance and above all love?

There are no easy answers. Being a child of God has never been easy. How do we love our way through the hurt, the anger, the rage that infect the human heart? For us there is no way but for God there is. Remember how Jesus found himself upon the cross and even then found a way to forgive. And moreover when the gift of the Holy Spirit gave birth to the Church God's love shed abroad to all people in every race and language upon earth.

We are now fast upon All Hallow's Eve. We are a gathering of the most remarkable characters all dressed up in an amazing array of human costume, some a bit spooky. If you find it difficult to love everyone, imagine what God confronts day in and day out. Martin Luther's words are instructive

A mighty fortress is our God,
a bulwark never failing;
For still our ancient foe
does seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great,
and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.

2 Did we in our own strength confide,
our striving would be losing,
were not the right *One* on our side,
the Man of God's own choosing.
You ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his name,
from age to age the same;
and he must win the battle.

3 And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God has willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.

4 That Word above all earthly powers
no thanks to them abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours
through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever!

Shema! Listen up Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones, let's try our hand at
Discipleship.
Love God.
Yes, and love one another too while you're at it!

In the Name of God, the Most Holy Undivided and Everlasting Trinity.
Amen.