

Sermon for October 25, 2020

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon texts: Deuteronomy 34: 1-12 and Matthew 22: 34-46

Sermon title: *Living Grey, Fearing Not*

Prayer of Invocation: Holy and Eternal God, we come to worship you this morning with open hearts. Your love and power can move mountains. May your steadfast love flow through us to move our stubborn hearts to love our neighbor as ourselves. Heal us with your saving love, for we are your people and you are our God. Amen.

Prayer of Illumination: Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy Fire, and burn in us; come as Holy Wind, and cleanse us from within; come as Holy Light, and lead us in the darkness; come as Holy Life, and dwell in us. Amen.

After my lectionary group meeting this week, I came away with the feeling that horses might be easier to train than human beings. We were discussing the difficult Matthew text in which a Pharisee, who is a lawyer, asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment in the law, and Jesus poses an equally challenging question right back: *What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?* On first reading it's hard to see how these two sections are related, expect to see that the intellectual battle between the leaders of the temple and Jesus is still going strong.

Back to the horse. A member of my lectionary study group is an experienced rider, and he said that the reins, saddle and seat tell the horse where to go. Horses move away from pressure. If you want the horse to go to the right, you nudge the horse with your left calf. In fact, a very well-trained horse will move in the direction in which you move your head. An inexperienced rider like myself might think that it is the bridle and the bit, which guide the horse, but my friend explained that the horse doesn't really need the bit at all; it's just another tool to hold the horse together, to give the horse security.

That same sense of security for us is the commandments that Jesus gives: *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.* Without love, Jesus is saying, the commandments are useless. Love is what holds us together like the bit to the horse; the commandments are the reins and saddle that nudge us in the right direction.

With these commandments, Jesus is nudging us toward a different life. Jesus is showing us how the transformation of human life takes place.

Dystopian novels and movies have become very popular in the last two decades, especially with young people. However, the dystopian novel has been around for a long time. *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which has influenced many writers of this genre, was published in 1954. You may remember the story or the film version in which pods come down from outer space, invade human bodies, and take them over.

Everything appears the same on the outside, but inside the feelings are destroyed. The story of being invaded by outside forces always works and scares us, because we know that there are forces that can change us for the worse. Matthew's text is a powerful one because Jesus wants to change us for the good.

Matthew's next verses don't seem very well connected to the original question about which is the greatest commandment. However, they do establish Jesus' messianic identity and are at the heart of the good news for New Testament people. Jesus is both in the line of David, and at the same time transcends his lineage. King David was believed to be the author of the Psalms, and when Jesus quotes King David's deference to him, Jesus is establishing that he is not simply David's son but his superior – the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.

Learning to grow in loving God and neighbor is one of the most difficult things to do. Sometimes even in church. Here's a humorous little story about power, not love. There was a church where the pastor and the minister of music were not getting along. As time went by, this began to spill over into the worship service. The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God. The music director led the song, *I Shall Not Be Moved*. The second week the pastor preached on tithing and how we all should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The director led the song, *Jesus Paid it All*. The third week the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. The music director led the song, *I Love to Tell the Story*.

With all this going on, the pastor became very discouraged over the situation and the following Sunday told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The musician led the song, *Oh Why Not Tonight?* As it came to pass, the pastor did indeed resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus who was taking him away. The music leader led the song *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*.

Now here are some real examples of following Jesus' commandments. When I worked at Piedmont I had a Jewish colleague Sam. Sam is a great guy, a wonderful teacher, and a good friend. We frequently ate lunch together in the cafeteria, and just as frequently I would leave lunch with indigestion. Here's why. Sam loved to argue. You could say that the sky was blue and it was a beautiful day, and Sam would want to debate that point. One day, Sam happened to mention that his father was a rabbi and that over dinner the family would engage in theological debates. Debate is very much a part of Jewish family life. Once I understood that, it made all the difference in the world. Sam wasn't trying to irritate me; he was treating me like family. Loving your neighbor is easier if you suspend judgment even if you think you know your neighbor.

Another example. Several years ago on a mission trip to Southwest Virginia, the members of the group mission trip were cleaning the mobile home of a fellow named Randall. It must have been a terrible mess, because the cleaners wore masks and gloves, like we all do now. In the evening, they would complain bitterly that Randall sat

watching television while they worked around him. They wondered how long the home would stay clean. Finally, one of the youth on the mission trip snapped: *"I'm tired of hearing about Randall's trailer,"* she yelled, *"To God, our lives are a whole lot messier than Randall's trailer."* The other members of the mission team were stunned into silence. The courage of that young woman to confront the group about its own prejudices allowed transformation to take place. The rest of the trip went well, and the workers began to see Randall as a person, not just a project.

And here's how the question of David's son relates to the two commandments that Jesus gives. The texts in the last few weeks from Matthew's Gospel have been dealing with the question of authority. The one who sits at God's right hand has the authority. It is Christ, but Christ comes in the role of the servant. We can claim that we are living good, decent lives, troubling no one, doing everything right, perhaps as the Pharisees might have claimed, but if we miss the part about the servant Christ, then we've missed the whole point.

To know the rules is not enough. Matthew repeatedly says that love, love toward all, without discrimination, is a key mark of the kingdom. When we use the rules, or Scripture, to punish or demean our neighbor, we are not of the Kingdom.

Today is Reformation Sunday. Two of the most important figures of the 16th Reformation were Martin Luther and John Calvin. The Reformers got rid of titles and called each other brothers and sisters. Both Luther and Calvin determined that we are saved by grace and not by works. Another was the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. God calls all of us to be witnesses by calling us back to the Bible (*sola scriptura*) and by preparing us to be a servant church. However, we must handle scripture carefully. Interpret all scripture through the lens of Jesus' two explicit commandments.

The world yearns for clarity to be guided to the things in life that really matter. As Christians we live by a different holiness code than the culture that surrounds us. We belong ultimately to God, not to empire. If we remember that and Jesus' commandments, we can live in the grey, but without fear. Trust, and believe that this is so. Amen