

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 10/23/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, NY
Text: Matthew 22:34-46

In this morning's collect, we prayed that God would make us love that which God commands. The psalm speaks of those who delight in the law of the Lord. What is it, exactly, that God commands? What is the law of the Lord that people of God are to delight in? Are we talking about the Ten Commandments? And, as Christians, do the Ten Commandments hold the same authority for us as they do for our Jewish brothers and sisters, or are we under a different set of commandments?

When Scripture refers to God's commandments or laws, it's not just talking about the Ten Commandments. After Israel chose to enter into a covenant offered by God and accepted from God the gift of the Ten Commandments, Israel struggled to understand how best to live out those commandments. For example, it's one thing to say, "Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy." But what, exactly, does that mean? If a person has a family to care for and livestock to feed, there are some things that must be done. What is the work that is permitted on the Sabbath, and what is the work that must wait?

Over the years, the religious leaders of Israel thought this through very carefully and came up with quite a number of laws – 613 to be exact – that helped explain the Ten Commandments, so that people could live them out. In some ways, those extra laws really helped clarify how to live blessedly and productively under the covenant of the law. In other ways, they kind of muddied the water. Getting caught up in the specifics of 613 rules and regulations makes it hard to recall the essence of the law in the first place.

In this morning's Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus gets to the essence of the law when he answers yet another question from someone who opposes him and his ministry. Jesus is asked, "Which commandment of the law is the greatest?" in the hope that, with ten "big" commandments and 613 smaller ones, Jesus would struggle and stumble and not exhibit the extraordinary wisdom that marked so many of the previous encounters with his adversaries.

But, yet again, Jesus replies with both simplicity and insight. He says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first, and greatest, 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." Jesus covers all the bases with this reply. The first four of the Ten Commandments are about loving and honoring God. The remaining six are about loving and respecting other people. The 613 additional laws aren't about anything except loving God and loving others – they're just explanations of how to do that in the context of the world in which the Ten Commandments were originally given and received.

So Jesus has articulated the very core of the Ten Commandments and the 613 other laws that help explain them. As followers of Jesus, we welcome and accept his succinct summary of the law. And, we're faced with the very same problem the Israelites

encountered: exactly how do we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind? Exactly how do we love our neighbor as ourself? Who is our neighbor? Sometimes I wish that our church, with 613 rules, would tell me exactly what to do and when and how to do it. That would clarify some things for me. But the world in which we live is very complex and rapidly changing, and the Anglican tradition to which St. Augustine's is a part is very broad. We're pretty much left to discern, through prayer, through the prayerful reading of Scripture, and by paying close attention to what's going on around us what God would have us do to live out the commandments in our own lives, in the life of this faith community, and in the circles in which all of us move.

I won't lay down any laws about what living your life in God must look like, but I'll offer some suggestions for you to consider. Loving God involves acknowledging God's creation, redemption, and sustenance of all of life. Loving God includes participating in public and private worship, intentionally seeking to be in the presence of God in prayer and meditation, and engaging our sacred text – the Bible – the story of God's relationship with God's people over many, many centuries. Loving God means acknowledging God as the most important reality in our lives.

Loving others means “acting toward them with their well-being as the primary motivation and goal of all that we do.” It means extending the love of God to those who are most needy, both by financially supporting the work of Christ in the world and by personally coming alongside those who may, in the world's eyes, be most unlovable. It means protecting and caring for those who otherwise have little or no means of support.

A vibrant relationship with God means both loving God and loving others. It's out of balance when we put our energy toward one and not the other. Theologian Gustavo Gutierrez says that “...people who [attempt to] seek God while they have no interest in their neighbors will not find the God of the Bible. Asking on what the poor will sleep is important to God.” On the other hand, caring for the needy without acknowledging the source of life itself will be mostly about our feeling good about ourselves, and will guarantee burnout in the long run.

Is there a spiritual discipline that, if practiced consistently, would help us open our heart, mind and soul to receive and to know the reality of God more fully in our lives? Is there one thing that we might start to do today to live out the commandment to love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind?

Is there a person, or a group of people, whom God is placing on our heart, open to experiencing the love of God through us – through our compassion, our generosity, our ongoing presence and involvement? How will we respond to that gentle nudging from God?

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Love - as the response to the God who created us, who redeemed us, and who sustains us. Love - because God first loved us. Amen.

