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Saint Mary's Church
Proper 25A; Matthew 22:34-46
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One day I got the message all preachers dread.
The person lined up to speak for Chapel couldn't come at the last minute.

So suddenly the preacher was me.
I did not feel bound to the lectionary because of the situation.
& I thought if I could get an extra sermon in on one text, what would it be?
& the first part of today's Gospel was what I chose.
I mean, it's the Greatest Commandment–
seems kind of hard to go wrong

As we've seen the last few Sundays, the narrative tension is building in Matthew.
It's the last week of Jesus' earthly life.
Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly. He's overturned tables in the temple.
Then on another day– likely Monday, Tuesday–
Jesus returns to the temple
And ends up answering question after question
We've heard about some of questions recently.

Last week Jesus was asked a question about paying taxes,
which, in his wonderfully Jesus sort of way,
He manages to turn on its head by subtly invoking Genesis 1

Now questions about faith can be great.
The problem with the questions is not their existence but their posture.
We can tell by the verbs used in the context of the question asking–
last week it was entrap, this week it is test.

Asking a question about which commandment is the greatest
could absolutely be sincere, but here it is probably not.
In addition to the verb "test," there was also was a very popular view then
that humans should not prioritize God's laws,
As prioritization implies evaluation,
And human beings should not judge divine law.

So when the lawyer asks Jesus which law is the greatest is a little like
asking a parent to pick their favorite child; any answer is gonna cause trouble.
To further complicate the matter, Jesus is choosing from
more than 600 commandments in the Torah!

Jesus adapts part of Deuteronomy 6, arguably some of the most widely known verses
in Judaism, the Shem:a
"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 *might*."
Jesus changes might to mind.

Jesus quoting this verse as the greatest is like asking someone who really knows music
what her most listened to song on Spotify is right now
and you're expecting something obscure and hip and cutting edge,
And instead her most listened to song
is something massively popular that's stood the test of time
like perhaps John Lennon's *Imagine*.

And then Jesus brings up yet another verse from the Torah,
a verse from Leviticus 19:
Loving your neighbor as yourself.

Love for our neighbors is macro.
Love could be working to end gun violence.
I know you're tired of hearing me say that. I'm tired of saying it.
But I'm not nearly as tired as the people with loved ones
who keep having to watch the same thing happen again.
And again. And again.

Love for our neighbors is micro.
Every single day brings opportunities
to provoke anger or to model compassion.
We cannot expect madness to dissipate by adding to madness
Even when it feels good and right so to do.

And y'all this year it occurs to me that these two love injunctions if you will
are two separate entities– loving God AND loving neighbor, right,
Loving God & loving neighbors are deeply intertwined, inextricably so
And yet this is not loving God **by** loving your neighbor.
The two are distinct enough that both need to be stated
So let's revisit the 1st part of the Greatest Commandment,
On loving God.

As former Presiding Bishop Curry writes, inspired by Dr. King, to walk the way of love,
We need to try to nurture a relationship with the **source** of love.
Now Christianity doesn't have the market cornered on the source of love,
but since we are here together in a Christian church,
that's what I'm talking about.

Just like any relationship ever, our relationship with God needs tending.
It needs our time and our attention, and it's cumulative.
Adding one more thing to the daily to do list is not exciting to me.
Sleep enough, drink water, walk, eat enough protein…
And yet changing our eating to respond to a medical condition
or like gardening–
Nurturing a relationship with the source of love
need more than one or two days
or even months.

And like the eating thing, like gardening, once we get in the habit the friction reduces.
It becomes less difficult in some ways.
Little consistent changes can eventually make big differences

So what are some of these tiny consistent changes? What might they be?
How **do** we nurture our relationship with the source of love?
We could meditate on, spend time with the teachings and life of Jesus.
Brief, reflective walks in fresh air, no phone calls or podcasts.
Sitting and doing some breathwork for 2 minutes..
The daily offices are a jewel in the Episcopal Church,
And if they feel too cumbersome,
There are other, shorter options in the BCP.
Doing a little is far more important
than being perfect.
Little consistent changes
can eventually make
big differences

And it's never too late to start.
Pat Warner, a parishioner here who died in August and is interred
in our memorial circle, made one of her best friends after she was 90.
I love that, I mean goals. And it didn't happen overnight.
Little by little. Day by day. Until one day
Pat and Shirley were like Fric and Frack

What difference would cultivating a connection with the divine make in our own lives?
It's hard to generate all that hope and love and joy ourselves
The world being how it is at the moment.
And if some folks are more connected to the source of love
Even for only a couple of days a week
Would we be more understanding or calm or
Or cheerful or compassionate or motivated?
How might that influence our households,
Our communities, our city, our world?

I'm not saying we cannot love our neighbors without being grounded in the divine.
I honestly think that's ridiculous.
I *am* suggesting that **sometimes** it helps us feel less discouraged
if we cultivate our connection with the very source of love.
Little consistent changes can eventually make big differences
Amen.

“To love, my brothers and sisters, does not mean we have to agree. But maybe agreeing to love is the greatest agreement. And the only one that ultimately matters, because it makes a future possible.” former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry