

October 26,2014  
30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Matt. 22:34-46

### **GRATEFUL, RIVILIGED PEOPLE**

Sometimes I talk to people who go to a different church and they say they really like the way their preacher does “sermon series.” That is where you pick a particular topic and preach a series of sermons about it over a period of weeks. I say, sure that makes sense. Actually when you follow the lectionary, you end up preaching sermon series all the time, we just don’t name it. In today’s Gospel lesson, we hear another of Jesus’ most famous teachings and for the third or 4<sup>th</sup> week in a row, we will be reminded that all that we have is received from God and we are to respond in gratitude by living lives of service to God and neighbor.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” is one of the founding commands of the Law of Moses. When he taught it to the Israelites according to God’s instructions, Moses said “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite 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. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deut. 6:5-9)

Just like us, the Israelites did not do a very good job of actually living their lives according to God’s commandments. But unlike us, they did a really good job of remembering their story which is our story, the story of the children of God. Everyone who heard Jesus say these words already knew them. Had known them all their lives.

The second part was equally well known. Love your neighbor as yourself also is part of the Law of Moses (Lev. 19:18). The basic principle underlying

*‘Love your neighbor as yourself’* is pretty much standard doctrine in all the world religions. I know because someone sent me a greeting card with all the variations.

Do not to another what is disagreeable to yourself: [Hinduism]

Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find harmful: [Buddhism]

Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself: [Baha’i Faith]

None of you is a believer until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself. Islam

In the beginning were the instructions. They are to love and respect all living creatures and Mother Earth: [North American Indian]

There is something distinct about the Judeo/Christian understanding though, and that is the emphasis on love. The commandment is love God and love your neighbor. It assumes that a mentally and emotionally healthy human loves his or her self. Love God and neighbor may not exactly be one commandment, but they are inseparable because you cannot love God if you don’t love your neighbor. You can say you do, but it won’t be true.

When Moses gave the people the commandment to love the Lord your God with your whole heart, soul and mind, and told them to make sure they never forgot, Moses also told the people to remember God’s immense gifts of love: **“The Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you – a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant” (Deut 6:10-11).**

In other words, it all belongs to God. We did not earn life and all the blessings of this world. It is the same thing Jesus was saying in the reading from last Sunday about returning to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. And the same thing he said the week before that with the story of the evil tenants.

Those first century believers all understood Jesus because they all knew the whole earth and everything in it belongs to God.

All that we are as a people, and all that we have has come from God. We are privileged people and we are grateful people. And with privilege and gratitude comes obligation.

Will Willimon illustrates this Gospel truth with a story about privilege. A friend of his who is a campus minister at an Ivy League school was talking about the incredibly exacting standards for admission, the incredibly talented applicants that this school receives, and all that students have to do to earn admission to the university. The friend said, “The only exceptions are the ‘legacies.’”

It is standard for Ivy League schools to set aside a number of places for “legacies” – children of alumni, usually the wealthiest alumni. These are students who would never be admitted, but for their parents. The stereotype of these students is that they are spoiled brats. They didn’t have to work as hard to get there. But the campus minister said that actually, some (not all) of the legacies are the most endearing students. Unlike many of the other students, these students know for sure that they are at that prestigious university as an undeserved gift of their parents.”

But if all the students were telling the truth about themselves, they were all at that university as recipients of undeserved gifts from their parents, their teachers, coaches, and all the rest. And it is the same for all of us. If we tell the truth, the uniquely American concept of the “self-made man” is a myth. Anyone who is privileged enough to go to college has a long list of people who made that possible for them. Anyone who is successful in business or politics, academia, medicine, the law, the arts, has a long list of people who made that possible for them. Anyone who grew up in a home where there was adequate food and shelter

and love knows who they have to thank for their successes in life, whether they admit it or not.

And it all comes down to God. I should say it all points up to God. Because those who are able to give the gifts of love, nurture, and encouragement, received those gifts from God. And so we live our lives in grateful response. We love God with our whole heart and mind and soul and we love our neighbor as ourselves. That means we don't get to claim entitlement to all that we receive. We don't get to claim credit for our successes as in "I got where I am through hard work and I'm entitled to keep what I've earned." We are all indebted. We all owe any successes we have to the love of God. And if we claim our rightful place as privileged children of God we live our lives in grateful response; serving God and serving neighbor. Amen.