

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
March 10, 2024 – The Fourth Sunday in Lent
The Second Great Commandment; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Last week our Old Testament lesson included the Ten Commandments. Using two passages from the Old Testament, Jesus offers his followers a summary of God's law in what are called the Two Great Commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.

In the church we are invited to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance. Last week we considered using the first Great Commandment as a guide to self-examination and repentance, asking ourselves how our lives reflect our love for God. Today I would like to consider self-examination and repentance in light of the second Great Commandment. How do our lives reflect our love for our neighbors and for ourselves?

An author who addresses the question of how to live by the second Great Commandment is a contemporary Canadian scholar, writer, and professor, John G. Stackhouse, Jr. In his book, "Why You're Here: Ethics for a Real World," using the Bible as the foundation of his thought, he asserts that our guiding ethical principle should be "maximizing shalom." *Shalom* is a Hebrew word found often in the Bible, a word that means peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare, and tranquility. Stackhouse regards loving God, our neighbors and ourselves as one seamless way of life, abundant life. He describes the Kingdom of God as a "win-win-win" way of living, in which everyone benefits by everyone contributing to shalom: "When you win, I win and God wins. When God wins, you win and I win. And so on, and so on: endlessly around the circle of love."

Stackhouse laments the fact that many Christians are taught that the second Great Commandment means that we should give ourselves to others at the expense of our own well-being. He calls this "bad ethics" which contradict the teaching of Jesus. As Jesus said to his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25). The goal is to find life, not lose life. The sacrifices we make as followers of Jesus lead ultimately to more abundant life, which is what God wants for us. When Jesus told the rich young man to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, he said the consequence for the man would be that he would have "treasure in heaven" (Matthew 19:21). To give away our earthly treasure for the good of those in need is not to lose treasure, but to gain a better treasure than earthly treasure. Will following Jesus involve making sacrifices? Undoubtedly it will. But are those sacrifices a true loss? No. Not in God's Kingdom of mutual love. What God wants for us - and for all people - is abundant life, everlasting joy, the marvelous treasure that is ours if we love God and love and care for our neighbors and ourselves.

Our faith gives us a vision of humanity, one in which every person is a beloved child of God – you, your neighbor, the people you love, the people who are your enemies. Everyone is a child of God for whom God wants *shalom*. So, as we reflect on our way of living in light of the second Great Commandment, we might ask ourselves how our thoughts and behavior contribute to the *shalom* of our neighbors everywhere and to our own *shalom*.

In this morning's reading from The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians we find these words: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." God has prepared a way, a path for us to walk in as we live our days. This way of life includes "good works," acts of kindness to our neighbors which may involve making sacrifices of our time, our peace and comfort, our resources, but which ultimately contribute to our own good as well as the good of our neighbors. One of the strengths of this parish is the way people here actively take care of one another and provide for the community as a whole. I think we would all agree that when we give to one another, we receive as well – joy, peace, a certain satisfaction in walking in God's ways.

Let's look for a moment at a few words from this morning's lesson from the Gospel of John. Jesus said, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light" (John 3:19). In John's Gospel Jesus is saying that judgment is in the choice we make, for light or darkness, for goodness or evil, for God or the enemies of God. We need not look to a future punishment or reward. The judgment is in the choice.

That is not always apparent. When powerful people use their power in pride and greed and anger, they may seem to "win." Not in the sense of the win-win-win Kingdom of God, but in the sense of getting what they want truly at the expense of others. We may need to take action to stop such people from harming others. But we are not to hate them. With eyes of compassion, we may come to see them as God's beloved children who had the potential to become "saints," holy and virtuous, but who for reasons, perhaps known only to God, chose and became something less. The judgment is in the choice to love darkness rather than light. The judgment is in the choice to become dark when God wants us to be filled with light.

During Lent we tend to focus on sin, our failings and shortcomings. We may measure our behavior by the Ten Commandments or the Two Great Commandments. Another catalogue of human failings can be found in the classic list of Seven Deadly Sins: pride, greed, sloth, wrath or anger, lust, envy, and gluttony. Again, as we look at these sins, we may recognize our need for confession and repentance.

There is another list we might look at now, a list of what are called the Seven Theological Virtues. Briefly, here is that list. Prudence or wisdom, good judgment. Justice or fairness. Temperance or self-control. Courage – which may be defined as fortitude, forbearance, strength, endurance, and the ability to confront fear,

uncertainty and intimidation. Faith, which is both belief in God and obedience to God. Hope or never giving up on God's love and presence. And finally, charity or love, the love of God and neighbor. St. Paul has taught us that faith, hope, and love are the greatest of the virtues, especially love. And this is entirely consistent with Jesus' teaching in the Two Great Commandments. The love we are commanded to show our neighbors is much less about feelings than it is about action, about what we do in concrete terms for others.

I would encourage all of us to think about the Seven Theological Virtues. We see them in action in this church and in ourselves, don't we? Faith, hope, and love are visible when we gather for worship and for service. And I see tremendous courage here. So many of us have the strength to carry on, to put one foot in front of the other on the path of goodness, in spite of obstacles and burdens of all kinds, in the face of fear and uncertainty. We don't give up on God or on God's goodness and love. All this is only part of the goodness there is. While evil and sin may take place behind closed doors, so does goodness. How many acts of forbearance, of justice, of self-control, of good judgment are done and known to God alone? It is good and strengthening to think of these things. It is good for us to be together and witness one another's goodness.

We believe that human beings have the capacity to choose to love and to do what is good, because we believe that we are made in God's image and because the Holy Spirit inspires and helps us. We may say that human beings have a basic knowledge of what is good and recognize evil precisely because it is somehow "wrong," at odds with the goodness we know.

It will soon be Holy Week, when we remember the events in the last days of Jesus' life. Some people chose Jesus and the light, continuing to love him even at the foot of the cross. Some chose to betray and plot against and harm Jesus because they chose darkness, even in the presence of light.

The light of Christ has come into the world, yet evil remains. In this world as it is now, a world of light and of darkness, what will we choose? What will we do? Our lives will bear witness to our answer.

In Jesus' name. Amen.