

SERMON - THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 30 SEPTEMBER 2018
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina
Father Mark Menees, D.D.

The Eighteenth Sunday After Trinity

I Cor. 1:4ff

St. Matt. 22:34ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

My wife used to say you can argue with God if you want to; and you can whine, threaten, try to manipulate, and even hold your breathe, BUT in the end you can't win!! The encounter of Jesus with the Pharisees in today's Gospel confirms that opinion. St. Matthew presents us with a conflict story. This is not an exchange between friendly pundits in court; rather it is an attempt at "one-upmanship" by this lawyer, as if the accumulation of knowledge about the Law was more precious than the joyful living with it. This is a loaded question which is put to Jesus; will he accept every part of the law as equal?! By the first century the Decalogue had evolved to 613 commandments, (from 10 to 613—don't you wish your investments made that kind of return) 365 prohibitions, and 248 positive precepts, and then they were broken down further in terms of whether they were "easier" or "harder" to fulfill. So this barrister asks the question, Teacher, what is the megalith or the heaviest commandment? Out of all 613 which one is unsurpassable? Do you remember Groucho Marx's question—"Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" You do not want to answer that. This question is in the same vein. It is meant to be an entrapment, for if they are all of equal importance how can you pick out just one? But Jesus quotes the most sacred confession of the Jewish faith, the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your might." Every good Jew would know this for it was prayed daily. But the unexpected comes next. "And the second is similar or literally, a like nature, to the first, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". There is in these words of our Lord both a commandment, and an invitation to explore not the letter of the Law, but its Intent, or spirit. He ties together the vertical dimension of our Love of God with the horizontal. To truly love God means to be in love with his creatures! Is it any wonder we make the sign of the cross? (the vertical and the horizontal) It is not superstition, but getting the physical and spiritual in the same place. It reminds us that in Jesus Christ we come to know the love God has for us, and to know the love poured into our hearts is for His world. What Jesus teaches here he also embodies in his passion, death, and resurrection. These 2 commandments are encased and hoisted up for the world to see. What does He say in John? "And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all to myself." He was held to the cross by his love for God and us. You shall love God with all you are and your neighbor as yourself.

So, why do you think this very same quotation is placed where it is in our Prayer Book liturgy? It is second in the order of the Mass just following the Collect for Purity, and yet before we even ask for mercy, or hear a lesson read, these words echo. Maybe it is a signpost; an early signal to us about what is ahead in living and what is at the heart of our worship, because after all they began as a Doxology in Israel's life. Perhaps they serve us as an anchor to what really is necessary for us to have full lives. I think they are where they are to keep us from getting *lost*. Have you ever been driving in a new place and realized you did not know where you were? Every street looked the same, and no landmarks were visible to assist? And of course, those of us who are male know there is no need to stop and ask for directions!!! I have an acquaintance who I will not name, because he might read this, but have known for some 30+ years, and who will be late for his own funeral. This habit has been a dear friend to him for along time. The story, as it is told, is that while in Grad. School he was asked to supply for a Sunday service in a parish in east-central Ohio. The directions he was given were not map-like, but more what one would expect in a rural area. Go over 3 hills, turn at the second road next to the silo, go past the dairy farm and the church will be on your right. Late as usual he grabbed his vestments, homily, and books, jumped into the VW Beetle, and headed out. Arriving a few minutes behind schedule he noticed the choir beginning

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the processional, and so hastily he jumped in line at the end. On his way down the aisle he noticed that everyone else's hymnal was a different color, nor were they singing the hymn he had been told would start off the morning. Looking suddenly to his left he noticed a tall gentleman in a Geneva Gown with preaching tabs staring at him, who asked, "Can I help you?" "I am here to do the sermon this morning", he replied. Nooo, I don't think so came the response. "What church are you looking for? Holy Trinity Church. With a smirk the man said, "Son, you're in the wrong place; this is St. Giles Presbyterian." It is important to know where we are going, and what our headings are. Without that it is very easy to get distracted and to begin to chase after the wrong goals. Just as the Law had become 613 competing commands, so now one idea begins to look as good as another. One set of values seems as appropriate as others they will come to replace. A commitment made is good so long as I feel right about it, but is just as quickly shifted when something or someone else catches our fancy. I don't know about you, but I find living in our day dizzying, when we are bombarded on radio, TV, in the newspaper, in the shopping centers, and from co-workers and friends, with all manner of conflicting messages about what is really important and truly human. If I were to watch reality TV, and absorb the messages portrayed there as defining meaningful and responsible relationships, I would need years of psychotherapy to recover. I find my intelligence insulted, my values assaulted, and my future desultory. Is it any wonder our children and grandchildren, and we, ourselves, lose our way and become disoriented and lost?

When we pray in the Decalogue litany, "Lord, have mercy upon us, and write all these thy laws **WITHIN OUR HEARTS**, we beseech thee", we are asking for life and directional memory, not cognitive. We are asking that in the core of who we are, this love and commitment to God will remain clear, bright, and visible within us and for us. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind", is a way of asking us to be mindful that in every possible moment, in each decision, in every word uttered, and all encounters met, we have God as a partner in them. Love is not a great idea, or a novel concept, but a lived experience. To love God and our neighbor requires that we accept God is in love with us. Only when we see how deeply He knows our sin, our frustrations, our debilitating habits, our ugly attitudes, and still chooses to love us, can we realize what Grace means. And once that is given and received, we are freed to give it to others, who are no less in God's eyes than ourselves. Why this call to love, and why do we hear it over and over again in worship and scripture; because it IS THE HEART OF GOD'S ACTIVITY. It is the heaviest/greatest thing we can say of God.

So much human striving is driven by ego and self-centeredness, lust and desire, yearning to win at any cost, and even a mentality of battle undergirded by anger and a need to have power, status, and property. All of those share one clear trait; they can be lost or taken away. An enemy can be overcome by power, but only temporarily! He will likely come back, unless the nature of the relationship is changed. Everything can be taken away from us except love, and this is what makes it so unique. All else, body, intelligence, possessions can be taken by force or by circumstance, but with regard to love, there is no means of getting it unless it is given. That is its beauty and its power. To love God or a person from our core is to become one with them, and makes it possible for us to share unreservedly in both joy and suffering. This is a love that is not determined by the immediacy of the moment or the circumstances around us, but by the very presence of God's Spirit in us. I read about a young priest arrested on the eve of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Imprisoned he suffered greatly and came out a broken man. When asked what was left of him he responded: "Nothing is left of me, they have burnt our every thing save one—love only remains".

Love isn't a good idea or theory; It is the ONLY thing that lasts.

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Amen+

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