

Sermon
21 Pentecost—Proper 25-A-2
St. Andrew's, Methuen
October 25, 2020
William Bradbury

Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18
Psalm 1
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46

The rabbis say there are 613 Laws in the Torah, the Law of Moses, so it is important to know which ones Jesus thinks are the most important and necessary to obey.

But by the 16th century some in the Protestant reformation said obeying laws produces legalism, in which a person relies on their ability to obey, instead of relying on God's ability to forgive.

Some Protestants arrogantly cast aspersions on their Jewish sisters and brothers by calling them legalists, because they followed these laws, including strange ones like not eating shellfish or pork. They also attacked Roman Catholics for not eating meat on Fridays.

The irony, however, is that much of Protestantism became deeply legalistic itself, so that my conservative Protestant friends growing up were not allowed to drink, smoke, dance, and worst of all, go to the movies.

Starting in the 1970s a new wave of Biblical scholarship arose that said, "Hold on here, something profound is being missed in this understanding of biblical Law: the Laws given by God were given within the context of God's eternal and steadfast covenantal love. God doesn't say, "do these commandments and I'll love you", rather God says, "I love you and want the best for you, so follow these laws in order to find a life of harmony and happiness."

For example, Moses doesn't bring down the 10 Commandments from Mt Sinai **until after** God has revealed God's love by liberating the Israelites from Pharaoh and the tyranny of slavery.

In the New Testament Jesus at the beginning announces the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God and reveals himself to be the love of God incarnate come to save the sick and sinful.

As you've heard me say before, the Good News is NOT that we have to **climb up** a moral ladder to get to God, but rather it is that God has **come down** to us in Jesus Christ.

First John says: "**Beloved, we love because God—first—loved--us.**"

The disciples follow Jesus because they are overwhelmed by the love of God flowing through him into them: think of the woman of the city in Luke 7, who has such a profound experience of the love of God through the forgiveness of her sins that she pours all her love back on to Jesus by anointing his feet with tears of gratitude.

Jesus says: "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."

At the heart of our faith is the experience of the love of God flowing into us in our encounter with Jesus Christ, and then that love flowing out of us to our neighbors.

In our materialist culture, however, God has become a meaningless **abstraction** that can't offer love and isn't lovable. With this abstract god, the Christian life becomes a matter of rule keeping, "So when we die, we'll go to heaven." (a sentiment nowhere to be found in the Bible.)

In this austere environment, we shouldn't be surprised hearts have grown cold toward those different from us, because if we are not **experiencing** the love of God **flowing into us**, we will not **experience** the love of God **flowing out of us**.

So, we must be on the lookout for when God we lose the experience of God's love, **for those are the times we grow cold toward our neighbor.**

I suggest as a nation we are in such a time: yes, our spiritual and political leaders talk about God, but when we see the rise of white nationalism, factionalism, and anti-intellectualism, we can be sure God has become a heartless abstraction used to justify our fear and hatred of "those people".

There is a famous quote—attributed to various people—that describes the history of Christianity in five sentences:

Christianity began in Palestine as an **experience**.

It moved to Greece and became a **philosophy**.

It shifted to Italy and became an **institution**.

It arrived in Europe and became a **culture**.

It traveled to America and became a **business!**

Quoted in *Is Your God Big Enough, Close Enough, You Enough?* by Paul R. Smith

Until we recapture the original experience of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, the philosophy, institution, culture and business of Christianity will be hollow, powerless, and mean.

Therefore, every Sunday, and hopefully every day, we consciously return to the wellspring of our faith which is **the experience of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Remembering** as St. Paul says in Romans 5:5 "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

 Spiritual teacher Paul R. Smith offers a practice that I find helpful to wake-up to the reality of God and God's love.

The practice is three sentences that point us toward the three faces of God:

We pray:

"God beyond me, in whom I live and move, and have my being".

"God beside me, you are always with me".

"God being me, I am the light of the world".

This turns our attention to God as Infinite, Intimate, and Inside.

When we recognize **the infinite God beyond us, we are loving God with our minds.** Any god we think we understand is too small. The mind needs to be drawn beyond itself into wonder and awe.

When we recognize **the intimate God beside us, we are loving God with our hearts:** the heart needs an intimate relationship, a deep friendship. Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants...but now I call you friends."

When we recognize **the inside God being us, we are loving God with our souls.** As Paul says, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."

Each of these prayers can be embodied with our hands:

God beyond us—infinite God: **hands lifted up.**

God beside us—intimate God: **hands together, as in prayer.**

God being us—inside God: **hands crossed over our chests.**

And this applies to each member of the Trinity:

God the Father/Mother is beyond us, beside us, being us.

God the Son is beyond us, beside us, being us.

God the Spirit is beyond us, beside us, being us.

Jesus 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 greatest and first commandment. As we practice being loved by God beyond us, beside us, and being us, our neighbors will experience the love of God flowing to them through us.

This love of God in Jesus was the primary experience of the early church---and it is our experience as we daily remember our Infinite, Intimate, Inside Triune God.