

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” Jesus says.

Let us start this morning’s message by identifying his commandments. In my opinion, it is an unfortunate omission, causing the answer to be missing within the Rite II service of our Holy Eucharist service. So, as a result, it is a good thing to occasionally revisit Rite I, which we do during the Lenten season...and, there they are in our Book of Common Prayer. Right at the beginning of the service, after the Collect for Purity, we have the Summary of the Law, found on page 324, and modernized as follows:

“Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ said: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. These two commandments support all the Law and the Prophets.”

Notice the order. The central point of the life of Jesus as the Christ was finding power in the relationship with God his Father. The first commandment was...and is...essential to living into and obeying the second. The journey of a life seeking to live into the wholeness and goodness of God’s desire for us in our relationships with others is completely dependent upon setting the priority of loving God first. Jesus knew that and lived into that..and, as a result, God the Father worked through him in the ways described in the gospels, and ultimately in the miracle and mystery of faith that we proclaim in this season of Easter: being reborn into the fullness of life with God as people of the Resurrection, both in the here and now as well as at the moment of our passing from this life.

It is the mystery of our faith...because we cannot comprehend, let alone explain, the workings of God to transform us. It goes with the territory. When we pray consistently to God to help us become the persons that God would have us be, then we start the journey of life that causes us to be transformed into persons who keep that first commandment.

Then we come to the second commandment: loving my neighbor as myself. Toward that end, Jesus says further in today’s gospel promise, essentially, “Because I love you and know that you will need help, I will ask the Father and he will...WILL...give you another Advocate, to be with you forever...the Spirit of Truth.”

So, how is all of that NOT good news? There are millions of wannabe do-gooders in the world with every good intention but, because they try to affect good in the world by their own efforts, which has also often been done in the name of God by the church, those efforts fall short, leading to frustration and limited effectiveness. In all things, we must put God first, then the rest will work itself out.

Now, with the reassurance from God in following these commandments, what is next?

In today's reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, we are given some helpful direction in how to share this news with others....and Paul helps us with that most difficult of all church concepts: how to do that sharing.

Paul treats the Athenians with courtesy and seriousness. "I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship," he opened. He did not strut into their sacred space and begin to tear down...did not put them on the defensive right away with expressions, or even body language of superiority.

Instead, Paul took the time to walk around, to see who they were and how they prayed. He noticed the altar to an unknown god, and he built on this...which was brilliant! His thoughtfulness, his gentleness, his respectfulness toward other humans who were so different...allowed the Athenians to hear him with open minds. What a lesson for us.

As it was for St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland. As a youth of about 16, Patrick was kidnapped from Britain by Irish raiders and taken as a slave to Ireland, where he lived for six years before escaping and returning to his family. Later he entered the church and, as a young monk, went to Rome to convince the pope to let him and other missionaries return to Ireland. The pope at that time apparently did not appreciate the lesson of Paul and the Athenians, refusing Patrick's request by asking in return, "Why go to those heathens?"

But Patrick was persistent, and finally allowed to return to Ireland with a boatload of like-minded Christians...and they spent three years....three years...living and loving, eating and celebrating, burying and mourning...hand in hand with the natives. Gaining their trust. Earning their respect. And, the rest, as they say, is history...even to the point that, while it may be a bit of an overstatement, Christendom in Western Europe later survived the black plague and the resulting decimation of intellectual thought in large part because of the geographical isolation of Ireland.

This is the way of love. Take the time to investigate the history of a place or a people. Learn about the things that are sacred. Appreciate the things that others hold dear, even if these things need to be dusted off and fixed.

Remember, God has chosen...chosen...to abide within us....everyone of us....which demands that we treat each other thoughtfully and, as Peter says, with gentleness and reverence.

While today's readings sound, overall, like very good news, Peter reminds us that good news does not automatically mean an easy life. Human nature will always be encounters with joys and sadness, sickness and health, death and life that living in the natural world brings...and, no matter how hard we try to do good, we have our weaknesses and we all sin.

We know the challenges and persecution that the earliest church experienced, so we can envision how significant these words of assurance from Jesus would have been to his disciples. Just the same, the church today is passing through some uncertain and challenging times, and the Gospel of John reminds that we are not alone. This lesson is now as it was then: we are never abandoned by Jesus.

Jesus returns with limitless power through the Holy Spirit. The limitations of the embodiment of Jesus are no longer an impediment, because in the Gospel of John, he says, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” The Holy Spirit has been sent for us, and without any physical constraints, so that the possibilities now appear endless. Through the Holy Spirit, or *paraclete*, translated from the Greek to mean “someone who is called alongside, or call to aid”, Jesus can walk by our side although he is contextually and physically limited.

Throughout the history of the church, whenever a historical epoch has occurred in which the Spirit has been given primacy, the barriers of sexism, classism, and all sorts of prejudices have been torn down. The spirit of truth is ever present, not only to bring us to knowledge that we can be reconciled to God through Jesus, but that we will be able to discern values of justice, mercy and peace to which we should adhere within the discernment process that only the spirit of truth can provide us. The Holy Spirit, who is unrestrained by ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality, guides us to places beyond the physical and psychic limitations imposed by our bodies, experiences and historical realities.

Jesus is ever present with each and every human being as we walk through this journey of life with the unrestrained guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. This is God’s abiding love pouring from person to person, heart to heart...that Jesus that he would not leave us orphans.

God gives us gift after gift to help us deal with life. The blessings Peter talked about include God’s presence in each of us. God’s spirit stays with us, no matter how we behave. God is there to help, guide, comfort, and love.

Today it is all good news. We are blessed. We are loved. With the psalmist we can say with rejoicing: Bless our God, you peoples; make the voice of his praise to be heard; Who holds our souls in life, and will not allow our feet to slip.

Good news indeed....in the loving, eternal, always present Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.