

Proper 25
Year A 2023
Mt 22:34-46

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Giver of life.

Amen.

Today's gospel begins with
the Pharisees' and Sadducees'
continued efforts to trap Jesus.

They work ever harder to trap Jesus
using his own words to demonstrate their superiority.

Let me offer a quick cliff notes
on the conflict between the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Pharisees were middle-class men who taught in synagogues.

Their insistence on the binding force
of the oral tradition (the unwritten Torah)
was a key point of disagreement.

The Sadducees were usually wealthy
upper-middle class priests that worked in the temple.

They refused to go beyond the written Torah
(the first five books of the Bible)
what is known as the law.

Please forgive the very simplistic explanation.

My hope is this will help us
for the purposes of an exploration of today's gospel.

So, the Pharisees and Sadducees
are consistently trying to trap Jesus
by using hypothetical scenarios.

They do so in an effort to prove their superiority
over this wandering prophet
who is gaining quite a following.

You will remember from last week's gospel
that the Pharisees posed the question to Jesus
regarding whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor.

The very same day the Sadducees
seize the moment to try to trap Jesus
with a scenario involving resurrection.

Again, Jesus shuts them down
informing them that they know neither
scripture nor the power of God.

Back to today's gospel.

The Pharisees are back at bat.

They lob their latest scenario to Jesus:

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Jesus responds:

“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.

And a second is like it:

‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Sooo, Jesus has just taken
the most crucial tenet of the Torah,
found in Deuteronomy 6:5,
and linked it to a
second commandment found in Leviticus 19:18.

Jesus has just made it clear that
a sophisticated and responsible interpretation
of scripture cannot be condensed
to a simplistic understanding of
one commandment as the greatest.

In the words of one commentator:

*While the first commandment
represents the vertical dimension
of one’s faith (human-divine relationship),*

*the second commandment represents
the horizontal dimension (human-human relationship).*

*The second commandment is
comparable to the first in emphasis and significance.*

*Loving our neighbors is,
to a great extent,
an act of loving God
in whose image the neighbors are made.*

*One cannot claim to love God
unless one does everything
in one's capacity to love one's neighbors.*

(Raj Nadella)

I initially read this and I thought:

Yeah, that's it.

That's absolutely spot on.

But then I turn on CNN, BBC, NBC, MSNBC and the list goes on.

And I lose my certainty.

I waver.

I re-read this commentary and
I ask myself is this even possible in our time?

I think of so many communities
that have suffered and continue to suffer.

Whether that is based on religion, race, gender or nationality.

And I've probably left out more basis than I've named.

So, what am I to do?

What are we to do?

I usually rely on the gospel to provide some food for thought, some inspiration, or solace.

Words that I've heard, literally, all my life that I continue to explore but that often bring comfort.

Our world is a complete mess.

Shocker right?

But really, I am struggling to find a kernel of hope these days.

The news doesn't offer much.

My friends and family are all struggling.

I imagine the same for many of you.

I continued to read and read again and again one sentence from the commentary I've quoted:

One cannot claim to love God unless one does everything in one's capacity to love one's neighbors.

So I've set a task for myself.

Baby steps.

Teeny tiny baby steps.

What can I do to love **a** neighbor?

Or **a group** of neighbors?

I just am not capable right now of doing something grandiose.

I can't bring about peace in the middle east.

I can't solve the gun control issue.

I can't eradicate homelessness.

But I **can** do something.

We **can** do something.

Can we be more engaged
in a meaningful way with our unhoused neighbors?

Can we be more engaged
in a meaningful way with
Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence?

Many of you might not realize that
St. Andrew's is one of 6 Episcopal churches
that are members of this group.

Can we be more engaged in
inter-faith relationships in our city?

There's a very inspiring piece on PBS about the steps taken in the aftermath of the shootings at the Tree Of Life synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018.

Five years ago last Friday.

I **can** do something.

And I will.

We **can** do something.

And will we?

There is no shortage of need.

*One cannot claim to love God
unless one does everything
in one's capacity to love one's neighbors.*