

Sunday closest to October 26

Year A

Proper 25

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Psalms 90:1-6, 13-17

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

The pilot episode of the TV show "The Good Place," begins by focusing on our protagonist, Eleanor Shellstrop, as she waits in a lobby. The words on the wall say, "Welcome! Everything is fine." She soon learns that she is dead, and the waiting room was that of the entrance to the afterlife and for her debriefing of how her, well, new life being dead, would be. We next meet her soulmate, Chidi, a professor of ethics and moral philosophy. And then, we are introduced to their neighbors, Tahani and Jianyu, a wealthy, philanthropist who raised billions of pounds for impoverished people, and a Buddhist monk respectively. It's a perfect afterlife utopia. And what makes it perfect, besides the numerous frozen yogurt stands, perfect weather, houses custom designed just for you, and more, is the people. Each person earned their way into the Good Place through accumulating points on earth by doing good things. So I wondered, while hearing this reading, did those four people who ended up in "the Good Place" truly love their neighbor as Jesus calls us to do today?

This is a dangerous passage. It's revolutionary and calls us outside of our comfort zone. In another way, it's dangerous because when a passage is so familiar, and we've heard it so many times, we may think, I know the answer the answer to the lawyer's question. It's easy. As Christians, we have to love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves. Full stop. Done. Check. We're good. It's a no brainer. We do that all the time!

But it's harder to actually be than do. We could do all sorts of things in the right way for our neighbors. To love them real hard. But like we find out with the Good Place, just because we do the right things doesn't mean the right motivation is behind it. Take Chidi- while he sought his whole life to teach others right and wrong, he was such an indecisive person in making those decisions that he actually ended up hurting more people than helping. And Tahani, yes, she raised billions for the poor through her charities, but she was only doing it to get noticed by her parents who only favored her sister. The ends didn't justify the means.

'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.' Of this passage it has been said the whole of scripture may be understood as an exposition of these twin commandments. All of scripture can be traced right back to these commandments.

But then again, what Jesus said wasn't entirely new. Commentator Erik Thompson says, that ancient rabbis put it in similar terms, "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Law." What then do we need to hear from Jesus' words today? A sermon about love? Almost always necessary. Or how about as Thompson continues, we enjoy making the Golden Rule into an easy moralism, and it becomes an entirely different story when we internalize it- loving God means that you also love God's people. No ifs, ands, or buts. You cannot have one without the other. They are inseparable.

If we're all honest, none of us is ever perfect. I get out of bed intending on loving everyone, but then I check out the news or facebook and I failed before my feet even hit the ground. It doesn't take much, does it? And that's all before I get in my car to drive to church from our home in Longmont. I can't even begin to tell you all the things I've

seen on the road. I'm sure you yourself have experienced it. Just yesterday, when I was driving back from my first weekend as a trainer and facilitator at our Diocese's Church Development Institute, I saw some road rage. That's not uncommon, but this instance was particularly distressing. Two cars, battling for position entering I 76. The one pulled to the left, the other trailed him. The car in the back swung around to pass on the right, the car in the front maneuvered in the same way blocking him and almost getting rear ended. Then, they both swerved to the left and one car tried to overtake the other on the shoulder. Not only were they putting their own lives in danger, but the lives of all of us who witnessed it. I couldn't help but cry out, how have we strayed so very far from realizing our interconnectedness, and remembering that we are made from the very same things with the very same hopes and dreams for happiness and prosperity?

Love God, Love your neighbor. We have completely and utterly lost sight of this concept. What more can we say after hearing this? What more can the lawyer or the Pharisees say? It's simple what we need to do. But it's almost so simple that it becomes the most difficult mission to which we're ever called. It becomes the most difficult thing we've ever done. It becomes the most difficult journey to being that there is. Like many of our Christian values, it's easy to understand with our heads and hard to do with our hearts.

What happens if we don't follow these commandments? Well, from what we can discern theologically, what we do on earth - good or bad actions - aren't being calculated up and directly affecting where we end up when we die like in the Good Place. Because these verses about loving God and loving neighbor, just like all pieces of scripture, are an open-ended conversation of which we get to be a part. And through that conversation, we are reminded that the highest form of true love, agape love, radiates from our relationship with God. In honor of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation on Tuesday, I have a number of friends who are posting their own 95

theses for today's day and age. 95 statements against the abuse of power- it feels very relevant today. What would be on your list?

This is a good season to do a heart check as to how we're doing and being. When you do your heart check, you might find this is impossible to do. But as we say in our baptismal vows, we can with God's help.