

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

Before I was ordained to the priesthood, I had another career. For over twenty years, I was a psychotherapist which has proven to be good training for the priesthood. During all that time, I knew that it was a career that was not the final destination for me. It was preparation. One of the things that I learned about as a psychotherapist is the importance of boundaries. What's mine and what's yours. Where does my involvement and authority belong and where should I stand to the side? In the beginning, like most therapists when they start their careers, I was periodically overwhelmed by the emotional pain and tangled web of relationships my clients presented to me. I would find myself worrying about and thinking about my clients and mentally trying to fix every problem that was placed before me. With some good coaching from my own therapist...every therapist needs a good therapist...I came to realize what was mine to 'fix' and what belonged to my clients and was theirs to 'fix.' I figured out where the boundaries were. Eventually, I got a vanity license plate for my car that said NMP1...which stands for "Not My Problem" which sounds harsh and uncaring on the surface, but was actually a reminder to me about where the boundaries are...which problems were mine to fix and which problems belonged to my clients and were theirs to fix. I could ask the provocative questions to help them see something in a different way, but how they decided to solve their problem was ultimately up to them.

So what do boundaries have to do with Matthew's message to us this morning in the gospel? Quite a lot as it turns out. In the passages that Matthew gives us about Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the events of the week that we now know as Holy Week, Jesus wrestles with the boundaries of those entrusted with the safekeeping of the ancient religion of Judaism...the religion that Jesus practices ...and the morés and customs in the city of Jerusalem in which he now finds himself. Along the way Jesus has shattered some of the boundaries of this culture and this religion. He has encouraged his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath (which constitutes working on the Sabbath) which is prohibited by Jewish law. He has turned over the tables of the money changers in the Temple in a passionate display of anger at the desecration of the Temple which violated the morés of current Jerusalem. He has started teaching others inside the Temple which violates the prescribed duties and privileges of the Temple leaders who question his authority. Who told you that you could teach inside the Temple? And because he has crossed those boundaries, those in authority have engaged with him to try to trick him into saying something they can use to condemn him with his own words.

But Jesus, as we have seen, is always at least two steps ahead of them. He refuses to tell them by what authority he is teaching in the temple. They try to get him to take a side in the question of whether or not the Jews should pay taxes to Rome. They try to get him to explain to whom a widowed woman is married in heaven when she has successively married seven brothers...all of whom had died before her. Now they want to know which of the Ten Commandments is the most important. The Temple leaders keep throwing punches and Jesus keeps bobbing and weaving and ducking every single potentially lethal blow. And while they are sparring, Jesus manages to land a few verbal punches of his own until he finally stops them in their tracks by asking them "Who do you think the Messiah is?" And they identify the Messiah as David's son. And then Jesus quotes scripture to them by recalling in Psalm 110 that David calls the Messiah "Lord." Jesus wants the Temple authorities to answer the question: "If David calls the Messiah 'Lord' then how can he be his son?" Jesus has broken all the boundaries that elevate the Temple authorities as the premiere authorities on the practice of Judaism. They are stopped in their tracks and they stop asking Jesus questions.

Jesus does go on to answer their last question, though...the one they've just asked about the greatest commandment. Jesus explains to them that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart and soul. And then he adds to that a second commandment...to love your neighbor as yourself. You see, if you love God, then you love everything about God and all that God created which means you love your neighbor who is a creation of God in that your neighbor...like you...has been made in the image of God. You can't love God without loving your neighbor.

So what does it mean to love God and to love our neighbor? In this context, we are not talking about an emotion known as love. It's hard to conjure up a feeling of deep and abiding affection for a God who is often distant and unknown and is also invisible. We can't have a candlelight dinner with God and gaze into his eyes across the table. We can't go for a walk and hold God's hand. We can't text message God and get a reply on our phone. We can't give God a big bear hug and get one in return. We can't *do* with God any of the actions that we normally associate with love, so perhaps our love for God is not actually the feeling that we associate with human love. Perhaps our love for God is an intellectual exercise...a decision on our part...to include God in our thoughts...to be still and listen for God to stir within us...to act in a way that we believe God wants us to act. So love for God is both an intellectual decision along with the actions that express it.

Biblical love as we have learned is not passive. Biblical love is something that we do. To love neighbor as one's self is to act toward them the way we would act toward those we are closest

to. Think for a minute what kinds of actions make you feel loved and cared for and valued and give you a sense of belonging. Those are the things God is calling upon us to do for others of His children. When we love God's people...all of God's people...we are at the same time loving God. It's not the emotion that we call love that is commanded of us; only the action of love that is commanded.

When Jesus quotes scripture from the Torah to the Temple authorities he demonstrates to them his understanding of the Torah and his devotion to it and his ability to interpret it correctly. When they criticize him for allowing his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath and thus violate the laws about working on the Sabbath, Jesus chastises them for missing the point. He doesn't criticize them for trying to keep the Torah in its smallest detail. He criticizes them for falling short of obedience to the central values of the Torah which are justice, mercy, and faithfulness to God. None of which he sees the religious leaders acting upon. He calls the religious leaders out for focusing on minute details rather than fulfilling the main tenets of their own religion. And stop and think for a minute whether or not we Christians don't do the same thing. Are we upset with someone who doesn't cross themselves during the service or bow their heads at the appropriate time or conform to other outward signs of respect and at the same time we refuse to pass the peace to someone because we are mad at them or don't like them? None of us are immune from missing the point just as the Pharisees and Scribes did. Sometimes, just like those Temple leaders, we focus on the wrong things. Sometimes loving another of God's children...our neighbor...is a matter of acting in a loving way even when we don't feel very loving.

Always acting in a loving way requires us to take action. It means we cannot stay silent when we see injustice. We cannot remain passive when we see a situation that cries out for mercy. The Jesus we see in these stories thinks that to love God with the whole self, with "all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind" (verse 37) is demanding and risky. Following the path of love leads Jesus to jump into conflicts and debates with his whole self. Love leads Jesus into all kinds of situations that are not just uncomfortable, but dangerous. Eventually, love gets him killed.

Too often in the church, "love" is used as an excuse to take the path of least resistance instead of the path of excellence. Jesus is a lot more complicated than we sometimes pretend, and the love he taught demands that we expand our whole selves for God and neighbor -- striving for excellence in all we think, all we say, and all we do. It's all too easy to remake Jesus in our own image, picking and choosing from the biblical testimony in order to depict him as a friendly, harmless mainline person with boundary issues -- the same kind of "quivering mass of availability" that too many progressive pastors have become as Stanley Hauwervas would say

.¹ But if we take Matthew's testimony seriously, we confront the possibility that our Lord discovered that sometimes in this life there are things worth getting worked up about, things worth arguing about, things that call for those who are able to be both loving *and* formidable in the cause of righteousness.

And remember what we have learned about the word 'righteousness'? It's not about piety, right? Righteousness is about being in a right relationship with God...being aligned with God...and doing what God is asking us to do. We cannot be in right relationship with God unless we do everything possible to be in right relationship with our neighbors as well. If our love for God does not translate into love for neighbors—near and far—or, even worse, prevents us from loving our neighbors, it is a façade designed to cover up indifference, laziness or perhaps even hostility towards our neighbor. Or maybe what stops us in our tracks is a sense of shyness, a sense of unworthiness, or a struggle with our own sense of self-esteem.

While we are called to pray in situations of oppression, our prayers seeking justice for the oppressed should become a catalyst for action rather than a substitute for action. We aren't 'done' when the prayer is over. We can't just pray...we have to follow up with action. Saying to ourselves, 'this really isn't any of my business' is a false use of our sense of boundaries. Sometimes God is calling us to cross those boundaries to love another. Saying "It's none of my business." is just an excuse to justify inaction. If we know of injustice and we have the avenue to address the injustice, Jesus is calling us to action. Sometimes he's calling us to create the avenue to address the injustice. Do you hear the call? Are you being called to something in particular. Jesus consistently calls us to cross boundaries and take care of people.

God is saying to us, "If you love me, you will love my children." We must pray, but we can't simply pray. We are being called to rise up from our knees in prayer and address the injustices and needs we see. God knows that we can't do it alone. God knows that we need help and support and guidance and resources and energy and direction as well as motivation. Pray for all of these things and then listen for God's answer and trust in God's provision and act. Don't be surprised when God answers your prayers and you find yourself doing just that!

God is forever faithful.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.