

“A Saintly Mosaic”

Where does it go? Two weeks ago we were sweltering at the State Fair, last Sunday we kicked off the program year and Halloween ought to be coming up in a month or so, right? Hey, they’re still playing baseball! Turn around and we’re up to our knees in leaves and it’s November. *November!* By the way, Merry Christmas!

I for one need to take a deep breath, and All Saints’ Day is a good time to do that. I suppose All Saints’ Day began as a sort of saintly wild card occasion. Whereas other days of the year are dedicated to particular saints—or we might say “peculiar” saints—November 1 is dedicated to all of them. In general Protestants aren’t too keen on saints as spiritual superstars; we have this idea of the priesthood of all believers that spills over into the concept that there is a rich variety of ways in which people love and serve God. This is more is the spirit of All Souls’ Day, celebrated in the Catholic Church on November 2. All Souls’ Day sounds much more inclusive, don’t you think? And when we factor in the influence of other cultures which observe today as a commemoration of the dead—El Día de los Muertos—we have a wonderful occasion on which to contemplate the meaning of life and death.

Life and death: that’ll slow you down if nothing else will! And our scripture lesson for today is remarkably helpful.

Throughout the fall we’ve been working our way through Mark, where we’ve encountered some of Jesus’ most challenging teachings about discipleship and what it means to follow him. We’ve been moving more or less consecutively through the book. But this week we’ve made a pretty big jump.

Last weekend we looked at the story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus, which concluded with Bartimaeus following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus and his entourage have since arrived in the Holy City. But we skipped over Palm Sunday, the cursing of the fig tree, the cleansing of the Temple and a whole bunch of teaching to land today in chapter 12.

In what immediately precedes this morning’s lesson, Jesus is responding to hostile questions from the Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees. Each group has its own axes to grind, but they are united in their

desire to expose Jesus as the dangerous charlatan they believe him to be. They attack him with trick questions like, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not?” If he says Yes he is a collaborator with the Roman occupation; if he says No he is guilty of treason against Rome. You will recall that he avoids the trap by calling for a coin with the Emperor’s likeness on it and saying, “Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus’ listeners are amazed—not just at his wisdom but at his cunning.

They continue with the hostile questions for a while. But there is a scribe who is standing nearby and taking all of this in. He has been listening to Jesus... really listening. And he notices how well Jesus responds to his inquisitors and how skillfully he deflects their hostility. So the scribe approaches Jesus with a question that has a very different feel to it. This question seems sincere, something the scribe has thought about and wondered about; the sort of thing you would ask someone you respect.

“Which commandment is the first of all?” he asks. Of course this isn’t a question of numerical order, but of importance. What is primary? What is the central purpose of the law? Jesus’ answer should be familiar. In the Christian tradition we refer to it as the Great Commandment; and here at Plymouth we make reference to it in every new member class and every time we do the Welcome and Announcements in one of the worship services. We say over and over again that the purpose of the church is to grow in love of God and neighbor.

The precise wording here is, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Then Jesus offers a second commandment because it is so closely related to the first: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He isn’t making this up. The part about loving God comes from Deuteronomy; love of neighbor comes from Leviticus. Jesus draws upon and interprets the tradition of his people. The question is substantive, and he gives it a substantive answer.

The scribe’s response at first seems a bit strange. “You are right, Teacher,” he says, as though Jesus required his validation. But perhaps this has something of the flavor of, “Right! That’s just what I’ve always thought, too.” Jesus affirms him: “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” And that brings an end to the press conference for the moment.

We probably shouldn't get too fancy with this. The power of this teaching lies in its simplicity and directness. It also bears an important relationship to the teaching about the Emperor and God. What things rightly belong to the Emperor, and what things rightly belong to God? All our heart and soul and mind and strength belong to God. That puts the Emperor in perspective.

We are to love God with our whole being. Notice that Jesus is not doing away with the rest of the religious law here. He is stating that the purpose of the law is to assist us in loving God with our whole being; and we can't pretend to love God if we cannot love our neighbor. That doesn't mean having warm and gooey feelings toward our neighbor; it means seeking their well-being, wishing for them what we would wish for ourselves, and behaving accordingly.

It is tempting to dilute the impact of the Great Commandment by engaging in a lot of theological hair-splitting, or charging off to explore what it means for us to love ourselves or whatever. But I can't help but be struck by the absolute nature of what Jesus is saying here. To allow our whole being to resonate with the music of a love song to God is an extraordinary image. It calls for a single-mindedness and a focus of our being that many of us find hard to imagine. Maybe it seems a bit crazy.

But even if it isn't crazy, even if this is the most exciting, fulfilling, meaningful and useful thing we can possibly do with our lives—and I believe it is all of that—who actually *does* this? Even with Jesus we have to acknowledge that not all of his encounters with others seem to radiate God's love. Particularly in Mark at times we find him abrupt, dismissive and angry. These things don't preclude love, I suppose; but neither do they demonstrate it very clearly.

On some branches of the Christian family tree we have lifted up the lives of saints as images of spiritual perfection, examples for the rest of us to emulate. But we soon discover two things about these superstar saints. Either they're not all they're cracked up to be and the veneer of perfection, upon inspection, proves frightfully thin; or in their very perfection they lose their power to inspire, much in the way I can admire folks who dunk a basketball but entertain no illusions about ever doing it myself.

But mostly it's true that the more we learn about a given saintly figure the more likely we are to see their flaws and foibles. This is particularly true of modern exemplars like Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. Mother

Theresa, we have learned, was riddled with doubt and felt like a hypocrite. King was prone to sexual indiscretion. So even in people like this, who remain for us great examples of Christian living, the need for God's gracious forgiveness is ever in evidence, and there is much about them we would not want to emulate.

So where *do* we see what the Christian life looks like? Where do we get a glimpse of what it means to love God with all our heart and soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves?

Perhaps we see it best not in the lives of individuals but in the rich mosaic of the whole people of God. Together as the church we are the Body of Christ. Individually we are like tiny pieces of a mosaic that portrays to the world the love of Christ. Each of us is a piece of the picture. Each of us has something unique to contribute.

This image of the mosaic serves as a reminder that Christian faith is never taught so much as it is caught. It passes from person to person contact, through example and inspiration. Each of us can point to more or less saintly forebears who embodied for us some aspect of the love of God, who offered us a tiny glimpse, a fleeting glimmer of what it means to live a life dedicated to God and neighbor.

We learn about God from parents and teachers and friends, from pastors and mentors and community leaders. We learn about God from people who embody thoughtfulness and kindness—maybe not perfectly and constantly, but vividly and memorably. Every once in a while each of us manages to be an inspiration in some way, a saint worth remembering and celebrating when we consider the whole picture of the love of God embodied in the people of God.

The British children's hymn we sang a few moments ago says it so well: "For the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one, too." As we think about the meaning of life and death and our reason for being, here is a clear and simple image. We are here to help one another grow in love of God and neighbor. Each of us is a piece of the puzzle, a part of the whole, a note in the symphony. We need one another to be the best and truest selves we can be for God. There is no greater joy or fulfillment than that.

Happy All Saints' Day, all you saints of God.

Amen