

Sermon for LWML Sunday, November 14, 2021

Peace be to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now it's interesting, these lessons were chosen for the LWML, sort of their theme for the year, helping them to focus on mission and service. But I find it interesting that the passages that were chosen very much connect the Old and New Testament together. You see this overlapping and this communication between the Old and New Testament starting with the Gospel of our Lord. Jesus Christ is speaking, and He's speaking to the scribes. And one scribe comes to Him hearing that they're disputing with each other, but not being upset about that. But finding that Jesus is answering everything well. So he recognizes that Jesus is speaking very clearly and very precisely and very well, so he honestly wants to know. This is opposed to the other time when the rich ruler comes up and says, "What must I do to be saved? I've obeyed all the commandments. What is the greatest..." He says, "Love your neighbor," and all this. Or somebody says, "What is the greatest commandment?" trying to test Jesus and figure out if He is going to mess up and quote something wrong so they can trap Him in it.

No, in this instance the scribe really, honestly wants to find out what Jesus has to say. So Jesus says, as He has in many different places, but He adds some things to it that I find interesting. First off, His first quotation. What is the most important commandment of all? And He quotes from Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verses 4 and 5. This is what is called in the Jewish faith as a great Shema. This is the first creed of the faith in the one true God. The Shema is Hebrew for "hear." So the most important thing we need to do is hear. I find that interesting when we talk about Jesus Christ being the Word of God, that the most important commandment, the most important thing that we need to know about God, the first thing we need to know is to hear.

What are we called to hear? In this case to begin with, we are to hear, "Oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." In other words, the first thing that we hear is that there is one God and that we are called to listen to Him, to hear what He has told us and what we are called to do in response to that. Immediately following this great Shema, the Lord is one, this next verse that Jesus quotes is directly following, "And you shall love the Lord your God," that you've just found out is one and only one God. "You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength." In other words, the most important thing that you are to hear about God is that you are called to love Him with your whole being, the whole essence of who you are.

Now it makes sense. I mean, if there is a God. But in some ways, does it really make sense? Think about this. When we hear about an all powerful, almighty God who made heaven and earth, who is the king of all creation, who is holy and just, and righteous, and demands perfection of us, what is the natural first thing that we ought to be thinking and feeling when we think about this tremendous and mighty God? Love is not necessarily the first thing that comes to mind. Fear, anxiety, worry about whether I'm getting it right or not. Am I actually following the Word of God? And what is the Word of God after all? That is the beauty of our God, as the only true God. Not only does He tell us to love Him, that that's the most important relationship that we're to have with Him, He also explains to us exactly how we are called to do that.

Our rules, our laws of the Christian faith are very clear. We don't have to wonder, "I wonder what God would really have me do in this circumstance?" God has made it very clear: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, your soul." Which is a summation of, "Have no other gods, don't misuse my name and honor the Sabbath day." And then He immediately connects it to this: "You should love your neighbor as yourself."

So how do we love God? First off, we give Him praise and glory and honor. But secondly, we love our neighbor. It's very clear, it's very simple and it's very precise. And yet, if we think about it, if we're honest with ourselves, love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your soul? Okay, I can in theory, do that. At least I think I can. Love my neighbor as myself? Well, then I get into, "Well, who's my neighbor and what does that exactly mean, and how far do I need to go, and how many times do I need to forgive him?" We start trying to think of all the excuses and all the reasons why maybe I don't have to do everything quite up to par. Because loving my neighbor as myself, honestly, I want what's best for myself. If we're true really honest about our lives and our attitudes, we want a nice, simple, easy life. We don't

want any problems, we don't want any hardships. We want everything to go easy. We want everybody to do what is right towards us and we want to get exactly what we deserve... Until we remember what is it that we actually deserve.

Then we get into the Ezekiel passage, God saying, "Therefore, say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord your God, it is not for your sake, O Israel, that I'm about to act, but for the sake of my holy name which you have profaned among the nations to which you came, and I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which you have been profaning." In other words, God is saying, "Look, I'm going to act because my name is holy, and I told you I was going to act not because you deserve it, because Israel profaned the name." I mean, think about the whole history of Israel. God sets them up to be a light unto the nations, and what do they do? They start following after other gods. Or if they're not following after other gods, they're whining and complaining to the one true God that He's not doing enough for them. That, in essence, is a summation of the Old Testament. They are more than just being whiny, snotty people. They are profaning the name of the Lord.

And if we're honest with ourselves, we also, when we have that opportunity to love the neighbor and to speak truth, how often do we either speak falsehood or don't speak up at all, or fail to speak what we should, or compromise our ideas just to get along, or don't quite do what we're called to do? I hate to look at myself this way. I really do. But if I'm truly honest, I have profaned the name of the Lord. I've not borne witness... I've not loved God with all my heart. I've been upset at Him for some of the demands that He's made on my life. Some of the things that I would like to do that He says are wrong, I'm like, "Really?"

And now with the world particularly claiming all sorts of crazy ideas, it becomes more and more challenging to figure out where to stand up and stand firm and how much to say and how much to keep your mouth shut. It's a challenge and it's a struggle. We have failed, if we're honest, to live up to the name of God that He has given to us. And yet, what does God say? "Ah, you messed up. I'm getting rid of you. I'm going to start over with somebody else. I've had enough of your rebellion, I've had enough of your failure. I'm just going to get rid of you and find somebody new." No. He says, "But I will come and I will..." This whole movement that God is doing, that He will glorify His name. How is He going to do that?

He says, "I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean from all your uncleanness. And from all your idols, I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit, I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes." This is Ezekiel talking. Now, when I hear, "I will sprinkle you with water and you will be clean and you will receive the Spirit and you'll walk into statutes," my mind immediately goes to my baptism.

So what God is saying is how is He going to vindicate His name? He is going to vindicate His name by baptizing us, by bringing us into His kingdom, by giving us His Holy Spirit and by renewing us and recreating us as His creation, no longer succumbing to the sins of this world, but being separated and brought into His kingdom through His blood sacrificed in Jesus Christ, which we learned of in 1 Peter. That Jesus Christ knew the futile ways that we inherited, and yet He came with His own precious blood like a lamb without blemish or spot. Now again, the New Testament is talking back again about the Old Testament, about the sacrificial system of the blood of the lamb covering the sins of Israel. And then in Ezekiel, we got the New Testament image of the baptism in which He not just covers our sins, but wipes them out and renews us and gives us a new Spirit in baptism. So in 1 Peter, we connect Jesus to the Old Testament sacrifices. In Ezekiel, we connect the glory of God and that sacrifice with the cleansing of water in baptism in the New Testament. It's just the way the two of them, the Old and the New, are working together, informing each other, telling us God's ways, the way that He is glorifying His name, is still through us.

That's amazing. The entire history of the Old Testament is Israel profaning the name of the Lord, and yet God does not give up, but He gives us His Son, gives us our baptism in which we receive the forgiveness of sins, gives us His Spirit so that we might seek to continue to serve Him, to give Him glory and honor and praise, to love our neighbor for His glory of His name. That is our charge. That is what God has called us to, to remember that we are redeemed in Christ, that in our baptisms we are no longer subject to the sinful human nature that we inherited. But in our baptisms, that nature has been drowned in the blood of Christ.

And we are now, as we talked about last week in our All Saints Day, we are sinner and saint, where that old Adam keeps trying to rear its ugly head and control us, and we keep every day drowning it in the waters of baptism so that it is no longer in control of our lives, but the Spirit of God, which has been given to us in Christ, now that Spirit guides and directs us that we might walk in His statutes and obey His rules. Not because we have to, not because in doing so, we glorify His name, but because His name has already been glorified in us, we seek to then praise Him and thank Him for that wonderful gift that He has given to us.

And so as we contemplate the idea of serving God in all things, as the theme is "Our Hearts In His Hand", in other words, our hearts are renewed in Christ and we serve Him. In His hands, in His comfort, in His protection, we seek to go out and to love our neighbor as ourselves. For we are still called to serve God and to serve our neighbor with brotherly love. In spite of the chaos that is around us, in spite of the animosity that is out there, we are still called because the Spirit still has a purpose and a plan to glorify and honor His name through His Spirit working in and through us, to love Him and to love our neighbor. May His Spirit strengthen and preserve you in that one true faith now and forever more unto life everlasting. Amen.