St. Luke's Episcopal Church

Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost,
Greatest Commandments

October 25, 2026

Rev. Glenda Empsall

Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46

God of love and compassion, for whom all things are possible, may the words of my mouth and the meditations in all our hearts be true to your commands. *Amen*.

In the Collect for today we heard, “Increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command.” God’s commandments are about love, as is today’s Gospel reading. Our former Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, said all **.** the **.** time**.** “If it’s not about Love, it’s not about God.”

The 2026 Diocesan Convention in Pasco was interesting, informative, and relational. I always enjoy reconnecting with friends from all over the Diocese, learning new things, and of course – picking up “swag.” After the business sessions were ended, there were ecumenical panel presentations and discussions with “high level” representatives of Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, United Methodist Church, and Presbyterian Church of USA. We are all siblings in Christ; while also uniquely different in tradition, governance, and practices, yet close in mission.

The 8 o’clock folks hear the Summary of the Law every Sunday, and in today’s Gospel reading, we hear the words spoken by Jesus in response to a question from a lawyer, one of the Pharisees. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’

Jesus knows Torah and you would think the learned Pharisees would know that by now! They have tried for years to catch Jesus in some kind of heresy . Why did they slow-pitch that softball question about the ‘greatest’ commandment? Devout Jews (then and now) recite the Shema at morning prayer and at evening prayer. ‘The first commandment is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.” The second commandment is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’

The lesson for this week is so familiar that we should not have to say it, but we must repeat it until everyone does it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." More importantly, by some miracle of grace, we must not just say these words, but truly live them in real life. Jesus linked our love of God with our love of neighbor. You cannot separate the two. To have one is to have the other, and to neglect one is to lose both.

I have preached on this Gospel before and I am happy to visit it again, because repetition really is the mother of retention! The connection between claiming to love God and demonstrating that we love our neighbors became so embedded in early Christian tradition that three other New Testament books contain a version of this week's Gospel. This command to love our neighbor is repeated by Paul, James, and most memorably in the first letter of John: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

If we followed the first two commandments, truly loved God and honestly loved our neighbors, there would be no need for the other 611 commandments from Jewish Tradition![1] What keeps us from loving our neighbors? Is it a mindset of scarcity and "worst-case scenario" causing fear that there may not be enough of something to go around? We want our share – or maybe a bit more. We encounter people who are not in our "group." They are "the OTHER." Maybe: they don't look like us, they don't dress like us, they don't talk like us, they don't believe, worship, or pray like us. We think "OUR" values are best, and we are suspicious of those whose values differ from ours.

After Jesus overwhelmed the Pharisees, it was his turn to ask them a question, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" I wonder why Jesus lobbed that question. The religious authorities were obsessed with lineage, and Jesus knew how they would answer. In many cultures, including ours, "Who's your daddy?" is not a casual question!

The New Testament provides two accounts of the genealogy of Jesus. The one in the Gospel of Matthew begins with Abraham, tracing through Joseph and Mary to Jesus; "fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the coming of Messiah." By using this sequence, Matthew emphasized the Jewishness of Jesus.

Some scholars believe Luke was a Hellenized/Greek Jew, he also could have been a gentile Christian. Therefore, the genealogy in the Gospel of Luke reverses Matthew's perspective, beginning with Joseph and backtracking all the way to Adam; focusing on the universality of Jesus AND the gospel message; a message for both Jews and gentiles.

Whose son is the Messiah? The Pharisees finally answered Jesus, "The son of David." You may remember other times in the New Testament, when this phrase, "son of David" has been used. When Joseph was planning to quietly divorce Mary, "an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Jesus is called "son of David" by some unlikely characters: blind beggars followed him, crying loudly, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David!'; a crowd asking, 'Can this be the Son of David?' after Jesus healed a blind mute; a Canaanite woman shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'; the crowds ahead and behind Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem praising him, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Then Jesus said to the Pharisees, "If the Messiah is the son of David, then how do you explain that David calls the Messiah 'Lord,' saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet." If David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, calls the Messiah 'Lord,' how can the Messiah be David's son?" How can the father be servant to the son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions."

What a shame that the learn-ed Pharisees have blown perfectly good opportunities to learn from Jesus; to advance their own scholarship. The Pharisees are so laser focused on being right, on putting this upstart young Rabbi from Nazareth in his place, that they cannot accept Jesus' message of love and inclusion. They are unwilling, or unable, to humble themselves; to let go of their power. We must not make that mistake!

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_commandments

Zina Jacque, one of the *Working Preacher* commentators on this reading, pointed out what is not said. Why is it so hard for us to love our neighbor as ourselves? Thomas Aquinas, one of the great theologians and philosophers of the Catholic Church, said love is a choice, made again and again, in the direction of someone else's good. Aquinas understood that you cannot love without first believing that in this world the other person matters as much as you do. It is called humility. Humility is what the commandment assumes, and what we repeatedly ignore. We try to go directly to love without first passing through humility, and we wonder why the commandment isn't working for us. Without a foundation of humility, love does not develop.

Jesus did not look down on people; except for that pesky Canaanite woman whose daughter was tormented by a demon. Jesus called her a dog. She argued with Jesus and won her case. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was instantly healed. In that encounter, Jesus' mission was dramatically changed! He humbled himself to the Canaanite woman and after the encounter, expanded his mission beyond the "chosen people," even to the Gentiles, and I for one am very glad he did!

May the power of God surround us; the love of Jesus enfold us; and the fire of the Holy Spirit burn in our hearts and shine forth in the way we live our lives; with humility, loving God, and loving our neighbors. Remember to love yourself, too! Amen.