

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 26, Year B – November 3, 2024

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One”

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ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

VERGENNES, VERMONT

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 | Psalm 119:1-8 | Hebrews 9:11-14 | Mark 12:28-34

The *shema* is a prayer that faithful Jews say on the holiest day of Yom Kippur, in morning and evening prayer, before they go to bed, before they die, and at other times. This ancient prayer is named after the first word in verse 4 of Ch. 6 in the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Torah, the Book of the Law. Deuteronomy is also the fifth book of our Old Testament. In Hebrew, chanted, the *shema* goes like this.

Shema yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

In today’s Gospel according to Mark, Jesus quoted this line in answer to a scribe who asked him which commandment was first. The scribe had heard Jesus and sought deeper understanding. This prayer puts God first, front and center. The call to hear (*shema*) doesn’t only mean to listen. In Judaism, this is a call to obey and to do what we say. The *shema* is a pledge of allegiance, a hymn of praise, and a call to action.

Jesus added this verse that follows the *shema*: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” He then added something new: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” These two laws can’t be separated, that they can’t really be understood apart from each other. Relationships allow God’s love to flow into the world. In religious terms, God’s love flows into or breaks into the world when we love each other.

These are by far the most important commandments. If we love God and each other, we don't need to be reminded not to murder or to covet our neighbor's goat. The scribe understood that loving God and neighbors was more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices. Jesus reassured him that he was not far from the Kingdom of God.

In Mark, unlike the other Gospels, the theme of love comes at a critical moment in the life and ministry of Jesus. He has arrived in Jerusalem and is confronting the temple cult. He overturned tables and drove people out of the temple. His authority was challenged by religious leaders who were angered by his teaching and want to arrest him. Jesus' will soon die at their hands. At this moment, Jesus proclaims that the law is based on love—love of God and neighbors. The six hundred plus rules that the religious leaders taught and enforced were not the end goal. Love is the end goal.

What rules do you follow? I don't mean the rules set by your parents, school, employer, or the government. I mean the rules you set for yourself. Sometimes we're not even aware of them. We may have rules about how late we stay up when we have to get up early the next morning or how much candy we can eat without making ourselves sick, how much we want to save so we can buy something we want or need, or what qualities we look for in good friends. We usually have some rules that we follow, whether we are conscious of them or not.

I am asking this because the rules we choose to follow say something about what's important to us. And that seems to be what's happening in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus revealed a lot about himself—and God—in his answer to the scribe's question about commandments.

Jesus introduced us to a God whose creation is good, whose love is never-ending and parental. The metaphor of God as a parent resonates with anyone whose parents care for or cared

for their well-being. There are wonderful father figures in the Bible like Job, who offered sacrifices for his children. My favorite in the New Testament is the father of the prodigal son who welcomed his son home with open arms. There was no judgment, no expectation of an apology, no need for forgiveness. The father reminds us that God is ever-loving and merciful.

The stories about mothers almost always involve faith, sacrifice, and sometimes suffering, like Hannah and Ruth and Mary, who also personify *chesed*, the Hebrew word for love and loyalty. These mothers show us the magnitude of God's love.

The notion of God as a parent can raise a barrier to understanding and accepting God if a person has only known parents who are abusive or neglectful. In the absence of love and trust, it is much harder to accept a parent's authority. If we don't love and trust God, the rules don't carry weight. If we understand that rules are one of the ways that God expresses love for us, then the rules will begin to have meaning. More importantly, if we obey the first commandments, to love God and each other, then all of the other rules will be obeyed naturally.

God says that the first and most important way to love God is to love each other. The best way to honor God is to honor each other. And the best way to be in relationship with God is to be in relationship with each other. Why? Because God loves us with the love of a good parent, who wants only and always the very best for all of God's children. When we realize this we are, indeed, not far from the kingdom of God.

During the past few months, Mark's gospel narrative has taught us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The disciples weren't exceptionally brave, enlightened, or even noble. Sometimes they were competitive, ambitious, self-absorbed, and full of pride. At other times, they were afraid and struggled to see the promise of salvation that Jesus offered them.

How could Jesus' teachings about discipleship change the way we live? The upcoming election is important, and it is an opportunity to seek connection in community. Rob Hirschfeld, Bishop of New Hampshire, told the story recently of his decision to go introduce himself to a neighbor whose yard was filled with campaign signs. When the neighbor invited Rob into his garage, he was stunned at the posters he was that were deeply offensive, but he withheld judgment. As he looked around the garage, he saw a portrait with the first line of the Lord's Prayer written in French on it. The neighbor said he had gotten it at a yard sale, but didn't know what the words meant. Rob translated for them, then the two of them recited the Lord's Prayer together. That is the kind of connection that allows God's love to break into the world.

Fear sneaks up on us. We know what it feels like. We can feel it in our shoulders, our furrowed brows, in the pit of our stomach, in our restless nights' sleep, and our growing paranoia. In these moments, put your hand over your eyes to focus if it helps, and say the ancient prayer. Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God. The Lord is One. There is one God, one Creator, and we are all God's children. If we love God and our neighbor, everything else flows from there.