Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Twenty-second Sunday of Pentecost – October 25, 2026

The Great Commandment

Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18; Psalm 1; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46



Christ Addressing the Pharisees about the Great Commandment,
Lukas of Cyprus (1594-1596)

When I was a grad student at the UW a half century ago (!) my supervising professor always cautioned us not to even think about beginning to write a paper or our thesis without first having our "conceptual framework!" I'm happy to report that today's Gospel provides such a framework in spades!

But first a quick note about the reading from Leviticus. Our Old Testament lessons don't always dovetail with the Gospel in helpful ways, but this one does, and the last line is actually one of two Old Testament sources that underlie part of Jesus's answer to the question from Sadducee lawyer.

Turning to the Gospel itself, the previous chapter, Chapter 21, begins with the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. From the second half of Chapter 21 all the way through the end of Chapter 22, we see the Hebrew authorities constantly badgering and challenging Jesus.

Part of the reason for this is undoubtedly that Jesus' presence and actions and teachings present a significant challenge to the authority of the church leaders, as well as to their privileged position in the society, and to the balance of power between the Hebrew leaders and their Roman overlords.

We've heard many of these challenges in the Gospel readings from Matthew 22 the past four Sundays. All of these depicted how the church authorities sought to entrap Jesus basically through theological word games. Today's attempt is the last of these efforts to pull a "got 'cha" on Jesus but it is also one that quite frankly ends up with the "got 'cha" being on the other foot through Jesus's response to "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Perhaps part of questioners' agenda may simply have been to see which of the hundreds of commandments Jesus would elevate to number one because in the rabinnic tradition there were more than 600 laws altogether! And maybe another piece of it was an assumption that since Jesus was obviously not the product of formal rabbinic schooling, he probably wouldn't know which of the hundreds of specific laws in the tradition might be the consensus number one.

But Jesus carefully sidesteps this trap by citing the one commandment that overrides any and all of the specific individual laws of worship, cleanliness, behavior, etc. If you happen to be a Star Trek fan, this would be the equivalent of the Prime Directive.

Nonetheless, the truly salient point of Jesus' answer is that the only thing that actually counts is to love God will all your heart and soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. If you don't observe these two laws, none of the others really matter at all!

Recognizing that this dialog took place on Tuesday of what we now call Holy Week, I was reminded of a marvelous little book by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crosson, titled *The Last Week.* In talking about the same text from Mark's Gospel that we heard today from Matthew, Borg and Crosson suggest that the expression of these two great commandments have effectively become a Christian cliché.

And this actually obscures some of the radical meaning of Jesus' message. To quote from their book, ""To love God above all else means giving to God what belongs to God: our heart, soul, mind, and strength." These belong to God and – to refer back to last week's lesson – not to Caesar.

In other words, if God is Lord [with a capital L] , then the [little L] lords of the world – Caesar and his incarnations throughout history – are not." Even self-perceived modern day Caesars – or kings, if you prefer – are not <u>the</u> Lord, no matter how much they may hope that others perceive them as such and respond accordingly.

One last thought from Borg and Crosson: ". . . to love one's neighbor as one's self means to refuse to accept the divisions rendered by the normalcy of civilization . . . divisions between the respected and the marginalized, righteous and sinners, rich and poor, friends and enemies, Jews and Gentiles."

Well, there are some obvious connections between this Gospel and where we find ourselves today. This is not a stewardship sermon, but our theme for this year, "Rooted in love, bearing fruit" clearly reflects these connections. Most of us here right now appreciate that as a congregation, we've been through a great deal of trauma and drama over the several years – leading up to the time our beloved Jennifer joined us 2½ years ago.

During those years BJ (Before Jennifer), many of us wondered what would happen with St. Stephen's in both the short and long term. And yet, here we are. We're still here. And while we will never be able to capture the parish we knew decades ago, we are still here, and we're healthier in many ways than we have been for some time.

Why is this, so you suppose? Having spent a lot of time reading and thinking about reimagining and rejuvenating suffering congregations, I'm convinced that at least part of the answer is that those of us who have endured have done so because of the love we had and still have for each other.

I think we are more vital and more hopeful now because of that love, and that it will carry us into a more enlivened future together. I personally have experienced that love from you and with you, and it keeps me tethered to this place.

Looking forward, our stewardship letter this week reminded us that "as a parish (we) are rooted in love and bearing fruit. We love God, our neighbors and one another." And as both individuals and the gathered body of Christ, we (will continue) to grow and bear fruit in many ways." We will do this by extending welcome, care and compassion into the world.

Back when I was working in disaster recovery, I would explain to folks I was helping to organize that as Christians, we act like this because we can't not do this.

That's basically the nuts and bolts of the Great Commandment – to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" and to couple that with loving your neighbor as yourself. Again, we can't not do this.

We even re-commit to that a few times each year in our baptismal covenant, which we will do again next Sunday when we bring our Maddie into a deeper connection with our fellowship. We will be asked once again if we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. And you all know that the answer is . . . "I will, with God's help.

A couple more things before wrapping up. First, it's always helpful to recall what our former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry repeatedly reminded us: "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

Second, in David Wild's excellent short film that we will see at the forum, you'll hear the Dean of St. George's College in Jerusalem remind us that "Christians are the ones who are supposed to carry the message that each and every life matters." And while there's a lot said about hope in this film, it's also helpful to remember that hope is not just an aspiration, but the outgrowth of love. In fact, I'm not sure we can create hope but that it comes from love in the first place.

One last thing, maybe a bit silly but also something to be taken seriously. This coming Saturday is of course Hallowe'en, and in that spirit that and in light of today's Gospel as well, I end with this little meme: Hallowe'en – a day when we get it right. Strangers come to us, beautiful, ugly, odd or scary, and we accept them all without question, compliment them, treat them kindly, and give them good things. Why don't we live like this?

Amen.