

**24<sup>th</sup> Week after Pentecost, Proper 25 – Year A – October 26, 2008**  
**Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46**  
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Another week, another testing. Is it you and I considering the state of our health or the health of a loved one? Or one of many people watching the Dow Jones Index take another hit and wondering if our carefully planned investments or retirement income will allow us to pay our bills. Or it may be the millions of citizens considering their vote, and weighing which presidential candidate most shares their values. It may also be any one of us angry with God or the church, feeling abandoned by God, or overwhelmed by circumstances completely out of our control. At first, we may think there are many kinds of testing. On reflection, what we come to realize is that all tests in life are ultimately different forms of spiritual testing. In whatever guise the test presents itself, at the most profound level it is always targeted towards our faith, our values and our beliefs about who God is, who we are in relationship with God and one another, and our relationship with the things of the world. Our personal spiritual growth **and** that of our community of relationships has a lot to do with what we learn, and how we learn from personal and communal experiences or testing. God is constantly inviting us to self-reflection and change.

In the first part of our Gospel reading Jesus is being tested again. The Pharisees have a question about their specialty subject, the Law and the commandments. After God provides Moses and the Israelites with the Ten Commandments, it isn't long before each of these commandments mushrooms into a whole book. That is more than 600 specific actions or explanations of the meaning of those ten Godly commandments. Taking a much simpler line Jesus summarizes the whole Law and the teachings of the prophets into what we have come to call The Great Commandment. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... And... You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Like some of you, I grew up in a one-parent family. By the time I was sixteen, I realized that my meager pocket money just didn't cut it. Like most teenagers, I wanted money to buy stuff for myself, but I needed to earn it first. So I got a Saturday job in a small high street pharmacy. Working gave me enough money to pay for driving lessons, buy as much chocolate as I wanted, and save up for 'must have' fashions. A generous description of my spiritual life would be to say that I was a nominal Christian. Leaving work one afternoon with my friend, Wendy, we saw a man lying unconscious on a grassy bank near the shop. He was shabbily dressed, lying no more than three feet from a busy main road, next to the sidewalk. We stopped dead in our tracks. Full of anxious indecision, we looked him over, we looked at each other, and we both decided that we simply couldn't just leave him there. As providence would have it, I noticed a police car at the traffic light. Waving furiously, moments later the flashing red and blue lights indicated that the policeman had seen my signal and was coming to help. He got out of his patrol car, and while we -- in our ingenuousness were talking a mile-a-minute about heart attacks, strokes and all manner of misfortune, he took one look at the unconscious man, sighed deeply and said one word, "Drunk".

Jesus' inarguable response to the Pharisees tells them that "on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets". The proof would come later in Jesus' own flesh in His last earthly test, hanging from two intersecting beams of wood in the form of a cross. Living in to and out of the Great Commandment is also a test for every follower of Jesus. What is our understanding of God and our self-knowledge? What is the purpose of our relationships with God, with other people, and with things that surround us? Jesus also goes on to ask questions to the gathered leaders, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Their answer is, "The son of David." In the religious circles of Jesus' day, there were many different theories of who the messiah would be. The title messiah simply means God's anointed or chosen one. By definition, the great King David is a messiah, since he was God's anointed

king. However, the covenantal promise made to Abraham and reiterated by the prophetic voices of Isaiah and others is a promise of God's salvation for the Israelites through the Messiah. There were many among the Judeans who had high messianic expectations. In other words, they were actively looking for *the* promised Messiah. What many Judeans were expecting was the rise of another great warrior king like King David, and most certainly one of David's ancestors. Let's just say that for the Pharisees, who were the experts in the theory of messianic expectations, an itinerant Jewish peasant, however learned and eloquent in speech, with his humble way of life was not even on their metaphorical radar screen as a candidate. Regardless of God's plan, Jesus was not the great and powerful liberator they had come to expect. He did not come charging into Jerusalem with a great army, forcing the Romans to flee. In their pride, the Pharisees did not yet fully realize that God's way of liberation is through love and service to others, not violence.

By the time I was in my thirties, I had committed my life to Christ, and was very active in my local parish. Being one of the coordinators of a major outreach ministry to the local community, I was often at church on a Sunday evening. Teams of volunteers prepared a simple hot meal every Sunday of the month and served our hungry neighbors supper in the parish hall. I knew most of our regular guests. Several suffered from mental illness, several were struggling with drug or alcohol addiction, some were just out of work and out of money. All were welcome without question or judgment. One evening it was particularly cold outside and we invited everyone in to line up on the stairs leading to the parish hall. The volunteers, me included, were walking back and forth between the kitchen and the hall getting everything set up. As I left the kitchen, I noticed that one of our guests was lying, apparently unconscious on the tiled floor at the top of the stairs.

I looked. I saw. I didn't stop. I didn't walk over to check on him. I simply carried on wrapped in my busy-ness, until I was in the hall and he was out of my sight. A few moments later, as I came back out, two other volunteers who had also noticed our prostrate guest, were gently encouraging him to semi-consciousness. They were helping him to stay steady as they walked him down the stairs to a sofa where he could sleep off his inebriation comfortably, and with dignity. I stopped dead in my tracks. My heart, which moments ago, was full of joy and God knows not a small amount of self-righteous pride, instantly felt very heavy in my chest. Suddenly my mind was full of the memory of that other early evening so long ago. What I had managed to do without a thought for God or myself at sixteen, twenty years later I had failed to do. Even though I was now a regular church-going believer, fully aware of God's Great Commandment.

The Pharisees' idea of the messiah did not extend to an understanding that God would send His own Son for the life of the world. Nor did it extend to acknowledging that *the* long awaited Messiah is Jesus Christ. Just like the Pharisees, I walked right by Jesus and didn't recognize him. It was a profound lesson in humility, a vivid reminder that loving God is about putting my neighbors' needs above my own, wherever I am and whatever I'm doing. It remains an object lesson in how Christ comes to us again and again in this world, as the most vulnerable and powerless, as the most lost and helpless. And it was one of many startling insights about my relationship with God, others, and myself which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. What is the value of relationships in this equation? Would I have even learned a lesson, if others who showed me the right response to this man's need had not surrounded me? Jesus' life teaches you and me that there are no coincidental or trivial events in our lives. In our faith, through God's love and grace we are assured of our salvation. What we learn from the Great Commandment is that our unique journey through life – who we are, what we think, say and do, and how we grow in love -- *really* matters to God, **and** our neighbors.

Amen.