

**October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021**

**Year B; 23<sup>rd</sup> Pentecost**

**Deuteronomy 6: 1-9**

**Psalm 119: 1-8**

**Mark 12: 28-34**

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*One of the scribes came near and heard the Sadducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first 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 is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.*

***In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.***

**Alert parishioners have realized that the Old Testament and Gospel readings are very similar today.**

**The Old Testament reading is thought to be some of the last instructions of Moses, close to death, as the Israelites are about to go on into the promised land without him.**

**And in our Gospel from Mark, we find Jesus quoting those instructions, the**

teaching of Moses, when he is asked by a scribe which commandment is the most important.

The last paragraph in the Deuteronomy reading begins with the word, Hear, Hear O Israel, and continues with beautiful and practical instruction to the Hebrew people, and to us, as to how to hold and entwine faith into our lives, and into our children's lives.

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”*

Hear is not a passive word, but calls on us listen and respond, hear, pay attention.

And then with our attention to love God with all our being—heart, soul, and might (and Jesus adds our mind and our strength)—with all of our abilities, all our skills, in all of our days, with all our existence.

The commandment offered by Moses and Jesus as the most important is not passive, not casual, not Sundays only, not when convenient, but HEAR, love God with all we have, with all we are.

Jesus then adds on, as did rabbis before Jesus, the commandment to love one's neighbor as yourself, as found in Leviticus.

We are commanded to love God with all our existence and love our neighbor as ourselves, with all of our existence, loving neighbor as a response to loving God.

Challenging to say the least, both to do AND to remember. Life distracts us constantly, and we distract ourselves, with shiny things and self-interest.

And, though thousands of years have passed since the time of Moses, humans with wandering attention spans are as old as time.

Thus Moses went on to say:

*Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

In other words, weave the commandments into your lives, imbed them into your routines, keep them in front of you.

From this paragraph in Deuteronomy many of the rituals and habits of our Jewish brothers and sisters were born, and we have much to learn from them.

Back to that word HEAR. In Hebrew the word is “Shema”, and these words:

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”*

became known in Judaism as The Shema prayer, and families teach it to their children, and recite it when they get up in the morning, and as they lie down at night.

The Shema is included in rituals of Jewish worship that reflect “*Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead*” but I want to focus now on that last phrase and instruction:

*“....write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”*

I first learned of the ritual and tradition associated with this phrase from my friend Ellen, who is Jewish and was one of the secretaries at St. Christopher's.

I had a Jewish roommate in college, but as often happens among late teenagers, faith was not discussed much and I learned only about Jewish foods, when this friend's mother sent her favorites from New York! I still remember fondly the homemade potato latkes her mother, amazingly, mailed to us!

But my friend Ellen spoke often of her faith and was glad to share with me what traditions and holidays entailed. And from Ellen I learned about a "mezuzah". Mezuzah in Hebrew means doorpost, drawing us back to that instruction to take the commandments and *"...write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."*

Ellen showed me the mezuzah at her house, a small metal ornament on the outside entrance to her home. The mezuzah holds parchment with the words we have been discussing from Deuteronomy, the commandment to love God with all your heart, soul and might, and to keep this commandment in front of you, in your heart and on your doorpost.

(Show picture)

The mezuzah fulfills the instruction to write the words on one's doorpost, but so much more, the mezuzah can implant the commandment in one's heart.

Ellen taught me how she learned as a child, and how she and her husband then taught their children, to touch the mezuzah each time they entered or departed from their house. The mezuzah reminds them of the commandment,

and to live it out, offering care and kindness to others, to notice and remember their neighbors, to be a blessing to someone each day.

I appreciated so much too, that Ellen invited me to touch the mezuzah whenever I entered her house or departed; sharing the tradition, and the reminder, with me.

I read a bit about mezuzahs for this sermon, and found one quote that summarized its purpose beautifully:

*“The mezuzah reminds us that our homes are holy places and that we should act accordingly—when we enter them and when we leave them to go out into the world.”* (ReformJudaism.org)

And what for us as Christians?

I am not suggesting that we go and buy mezuzahs, but there is power to visible signs in front of us each day, to bring us back when our constantly wandering attention goes to the shiny objects, and even more these days, our attention goes to the temptation and the addictive invigoration of anger and arguing and hate.

As ministers, Tim and I have received many beautiful gifts from parishioners over the years. While at St. Chris I received a number of crosses from boys, especially several who had suffered the death of a parent or sibling while I was their chaplain. Those crosses still hang above my desk at home, reminding me of their grief and of God’s call.

Over our front door, Tim and I have this cross, a reminder, a bit like a mezuzah.

In some way we need our faith in front of us, reminders that the heart of our faith is as Jesus told the scribe and tells us:

*“.....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.’..... ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*

Amen.

