

Anyone in contact with the media has heard or read some pretty derogatory things about the Episcopal Church

- People generally seem to appreciate our worship, but the knock against us is that we fail to provide clear direction about moral issues
- My father sometimes jokes that we're known for having six commandments and four suggestions—though he wouldn't say which is which
- Because we insist on the responsibility of individual Christians to grapple with theological questions, we're not able to be as decisive as either the Roman Catholic hierarchy or fundamentalist Protestant pastors

Everybody seems to want simple answers to the problems of our world, and today we're in luck—the Gospel reading actually provides them!

- It's the Great Commandment, which will resolve every puzzling question, provide guidance for difficult life decisions, and settle all our differences and conflicts
- It's only two sentences long, so it's easy to remember and doesn't tax anyone's attention span
- Let's take a look and see if it doesn't provide some help

Perhaps you'll be surprised to discover that the source of the Great Commandment is in the Old Testament

- The Gospels have many accounts of the conflicts Jesus had with the religious authorities of his day—it can be easy to overlook how thoroughly Jewish he was
- Jesus was steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament), especially the Prophets, as well as in Jewish worship practices
- Our reading from Deuteronomy introduced the Great Commandment: "Hear O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone." (*Dt 6:4*)
- Not the earth deities of Israel's neighbors, not Greek gods or Imperial rulers—the LORD alone is our God!

The passage continues: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

- Somehow we got the idea that Christians invented the gospel of love—but here’s the source
- This passage is called the Shema, Hebrew for “hear,” and every Jew of that time knew it by heart, the way the “Our Father” is for us
- Every morning and evening, and at every synagogue and Temple worship service, the people recited this charge, promising to love God in every possible way

Two commands follow to show us how to make these words come to life:

1. “Talk about them” at home and away, from the beginning to the end of your day—there’s a special focus on sharing the heart of the faith with your children—but also in the public spheres of our lives—Hearing the word of God is only the beginning: it’s not complete until we proclaim it
2. Make these words visible in your lives: “bind them on your hands...write them on your doorposts.” Orthodox Jews still carry this out in literal ways, but for us the meaning is clear: let the things you do and the home you make be signs of your love for God

The Old Testament proclamation of the Shema directs us to make faith an active and visible foundation for our lives

- But how can love—even the love of God—be commanded?
- God gives us choices, including the opportunity to respond to the loving embrace of our Creator
- And if we talk about God’s love and make it visible in our lives, our hearts will slowly be shaped by faithful living
- That’s where Jesus comes in—not to overturn the Hebrew commandment, but to fulfill it

A scribe—a well-educated religious functionary—asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” (*Mark 12:28*)

- It was a simple question—any Jew could have answered it
- Normally in the Gospel of Mark, the scribes were hardly better than tax collectors

- But in this case Jesus responded warmly, reciting the Shema and even adding a category—he said we should love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength
- He insisted that since God gave humans exceptional mental capabilities, we must use them in the service of our faith
- Expecting simple answers to complex questions may show a lack of gratitude for our gifts

Then, unprompted, Jesus added a second commandment to complement the first

- It's not like the Shema was incomplete and needed to be improved
- But Jesus, eternal God born into a human life, wanted to emphasize the importance of how we live out our faith
- So he went into his mental storehouse of Scripture verses and came up with a simple but powerful phrase

Chapter 19 of Leviticus is a grab-bag of moral regulations: rules governing rituals in the Temple; admonitions to farmers about sharing their produce, breeding animals, planting fruit trees and sowing seed; regulations for sexual relations with slaves; a prohibition against consulting with mediums or wizards; expectations for the care of alien residents, and so on

- In the midst of all those Jesus picked out a portion of verse 18; “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”
- Apparently he saw that as an essential part of loving God, a preventive against letting our faith become too ethereal
- If we can't show love for our neighbors, how can we truly love God?

What's most distinctive about Christianity is its Incarnational foundation: because we follow a Savior who lived a human life, our actions are at least as important as the words we profess

- In some ways the Great Commandment raises more questions than it answers
- Reasonable people have different ideas about what it means to “love your neighbor as yourself”
- But the way Jesus added to the Shema shows that he was concerned with the tangible expressions of our faith
- “Walking the talk” was important to him

In the Gospel of Mark the action began with his baptism, when Jesus was acclaimed the Son of God and propelled into his ministries

- The same is true for us—through the water of baptism we are adopted as God’s children and empowered to follow Jesus
- Our moral imperative is to love God with every fiber of our being:
 - with the devotion of our hearts
 - with the gift of our eternal souls
 - with the reasoning power of our minds
 - and with the strength of our hands
- Then, if we’ll let it, the love of God will overflow from us toward the neighbors who thirst for it
- Ironically, unexpectedly, we’ll find that giving our gifts in the service of others is more rewarding to us personally than all the possessions and titles and accomplishments we’ll ever amass

I think I’m “preaching to the choir” here—you know this already

- I see you involved in dozens of ministries, within the church and out in the community, making a difference for others and for yourselves
- While each of you sees your own part in this, you may not realize the cumulative impact of all your ministries

In the spirit of the Great Commandment, let’s carry out a visible demonstration of your offerings of time and talent

- This is our new ministry directory—I’m going to read through the list of ministry groups, and when you hear one you’re involved in, please stand up and remain standing...

Look around—you’ll see a dramatic expression of the generosity and faithfulness of our congregation

- To those of you who are standing, thank you for helping to make St. Timothy’s such a special place—every one of you plays a part in that
- For those who are seated, there are lots of opportunities for you to get involved, to make a difference for others and for yourself
- There’s no better way to develop connections in the congregation than to share with others in doing something you care about

- You can pick up one of these booklets on the table at the entry—it describes all these ministry groups and gives contact info
- We'd love to include your gifts as well—just check one of the boxes on the back of your pledge card and you'll be invited to join in

Let us pray.

Loving God, thank you for the gift of your Son, who lived among us and knows all the challenges of our lives. We are blessed by your love for us and by the sacrifice of his life, which opened the way for us to approach you. Help us to respond by loving you and our neighbors, that we may share what you have given us, and in the process, grow closer to each other. All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.