

**Yr. A, Proper 25**  
**October 25, 2020**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1414 Words**

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

I try not to give much personal advice. It's not what I'm paid to give. You know, when somebody gives you something for free...it might be wise to ask yourself what it's really worth.

The trouble with advice-givers is that they are presuming to know you more deeply than you know yourself. That is often not the case. Humility requires those of us who are tempted to give advice to maintain a healthy measure of doubt about the judgments we are inclined to make on behalf of others.

I try to remember that most often, our beloved families and friends and neighbors will be blessed by genuine empathy more than by easy answers. We understand that actions speak louder than words.

Deep down, we all know that empathy is expensive because the giver must enter another person's suffering in order to be genuinely present. By contrast, advice seems cheap and easy because all the giver has to do is keep talking.

You know, the hardest part about preaching is not the talking; it's the listening. It takes years of practice listening to what the collective voice of a congregation sounds like, and those of us who are preachers still miss more than we hear. Nobody 'bats a thousand' in this business, but every now and then a preacher hears enough suffering, disappointment, fear, and loss to know that almost all of us need some healing words about what to do with our broken hearts. We don't want advice, of course; but maybe we could use some counsel.

I think St. Paul recognized this same situation with the Thessalonians. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, Paul was reeling from the shameful beating he endured in the streets of Philippi and then his false imprisonment. Paul—a Roman citizen—personally experienced injustice, and it led him to speak more boldly about justice. Paul personally experienced the power of God to set him free, and it inspired him to testify more boldly about freedom. Paul personally experienced the truth of Christ's compassion, and it spurred him to preach more boldly about holding on to your faith...in the goodness of God and in the power of Love.

It is clear from today's epistle lesson that there were competing narratives in the Thessalonian 'marketplace of ideas,' just as there are competing narratives in ours. Paul shows the courage of his convictions about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, despite great opposition. He lays out the stark contrast between truth and deceit, pure motives and trickery, words of integrity and words of flattery, gentleness and arrogance.

Follow along with me as we look for proof of what to believe...and who to believe. The real proof of Paul's testimony is not found in words, but rather in actions. This is where the contrast between Paul's narrative and his opponents' narrative is most clear. Paul reminds the people of Thessalonica how he (and his preaching companions) were present with them. "We were gentle among you," he says, "like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children."

Isn't it fascinating that in this Macedonian region whose reputation was founded upon brute strength and military might and raw political power, St. Paul uses a feminine image...of a nurse...with her children...as the proof of his authenticity? "So deeply do we care for you," he writes, "that we are determined to share ourselves with you, not just our gospel."

In other words, Paul understands that empathy is more expensive—and therefore—more valuable, than easy answers. Paul understands that actions speak louder than words.

And this sets the stage for our Gospel lesson. Five weeks in a row, we have been listening to what seems like an intractable debate between Jesus and the powerful leaders of his day—the chief priests, Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, and elders in the City of Jerusalem. The most influential religious strong men were all lined up on the side of the most powerful political strong men.

Opposite them stands Jesus...the Galilean who eats and drinks with disreputable people. Except for a few daring disciples, this outsider named Jesus is standing alone. This wandering rabbi who is preoccupied with the needs of the poor, the sick, the hungry, and the dying—he is standing alone. Today is the day when he sums it all up.

“Teacher” they call out, (and you can hear the sarcasm dripping from their mouths). “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Now, this is not a hard question, nor is it a trick question. Of course, the greatest commandment is the first commandment Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai.

And Jesus gives the correct—and expected—answer, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” They could all agree about this, but Jesus is not trying to find common ground with hypocrites.

Instead, Jesus is about to connect their shared theology about obedience to God with a practical theology of what it looks like in real life. Jesus is about to show how our lives reveal the truth of what we really believe. The radical thing Jesus says next is what I want you to notice. Unlike the first and greatest commandment, there is nothing in the Ten Commandments about loving your neighbor as much as yourself. You have to look deep inside the holiness code of the Book of Leviticus to find this commandment.

Well, guess who was supposed to pay the most careful attention to the holiness code? All those guys standing opposite Jesus.

As we heard this morning, the Book of Leviticus records the God of Israel setting a high standard for all of us who claim to love God. “Be holy, because I am holy. Be just in your dealings; stop slandering other people; cease being greedy at other peoples’ expense; stop hating; speak out and reprove injustice or you will be just as guilty; and don’t practice vengeance or bear grudges. (In other words, the LORD commands,) “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” God understands that actions speak louder than words.

Jesus fuses together the love of God with the love of neighbor as essentially one and the same. “*This*,” he says, “this is the summary of all the law and the prophets.” Jesus not only gives a complete answer to their simple question about the greatest commandment; he also calls out the utter lack of holiness of those guys standing opposite him...in soft robes with pockets full of Roman coins and hearts full of bitterness toward Jesus and all the poor, wrecked souls for whom he cared so compassionately.

Jesus understands that empathy is more expensive—and therefore—more valuable, than easy answers. Twenty years before Paul arrived in Thessalonica, Jesus showed just how much he was willing to share *himself*—not only his gospel, but himself—with us...because Jesus understands that actions speak louder than words.

Many of you have been battered pretty hard lately—not just with the general malaise of our national dysfunction in the face of real and difficult challenges, but also very personal losses, diagnoses, struggles, disappointments and heart breaks.

I hear your collective voice. I know you want more than easy answers. I know you need more than free advice. You deserve genuine empathy.

Well, the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that we are created in the image of God to be spiritual—i.e. fully capable of receiving and sharing—the love of God. The other Good News in today’s Gospel lesson is that we are created in the image of God to be in relationships—and that means blessing *and being blessed by* genuine empathy with other people...with our neighbors. It is expensive—and therefore—valuable.

Dear people of God, the sources of our afflictions are many, but the source of our healing is singular. Nothing but the goodness and love of God can save us...which is why God’s love is worthy of all our hearts, our souls, and our minds. Mysteriously, the power of this goodness and love is only magnified when we share it with our neighbors.

So, as it turns out, the hope for our future is summed up in these two great, inseparable commandments taught by Jesus, himself—Love God. Love your neighbor. That’s not advice. That’s just the truth of what we can still do with our broken hearts, and in the process be blessed and healed, ourselves.

Amen.