

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

A Celebration of All Saints

Texts for All Saints:

ISAIAH 25:6-9

PSALM 24

REVELATION 21:1-6a

JOHN 11:32-44

Texts for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

RUTH 1:1-18

PSALM 146:1-10

HEBREWS 9:11-14

MARK 12:28-34

November 3, 2024

### *One of One!*

**One of one!** “One of one” is an expression used to describe something that is so unique, so special, that there is literally only one example, one edition, one version, one of a kind, the only one in existence. The phrase is particularly used in describing classic and antique cars, discoveries that usually translate into serious money for someone lucky enough to uncover by accident what is usually a barn find! **613!** 613 is the exact number of laws found in Torah, these **commandments** also known as “mitzvot,” the plural form of “mitzvah,” literally translated as “the commandment.” **These rules and regulations composed a myriad set of laws crossing the spectrum from the ridiculous to the sublime, covering every aspect of life in ancient Israelite culture. Just a few examples:** number 162, You are “not to eat the flesh of an ox that was condemned to be stoned;” under no circumstances, never do that; number 167, You are “not to eat blood;” and there went my tasty medium rare steak; number 204, You are “not to swear needlessly;” someone will need to further clarify those boundaries because I am sure I am over the limit, exceeding my quota; and finally, **number 367, You are “not to wear garments made of wool and linen mixed together;” a commandment I assume many of us have broken, are guilty of having the audacity of wearing mixed fabrics!** These laws are still respected and revered

today, dated and outdated as they now are, comprising an integral part of the rich cultural history of Judaism, the direct religious forebear of our Christian faith, a proud kinship being rediscovered, perhaps claimed in some circles for the first time! Every detail imaginable is contained in these laws, every category describing both prohibitions and promoted practices, negatives and affirmatives. **Two-in-one is the combination of two primary laws, two sides of the same coin, these two commandments clearly expressed in the Hebrew Bible, requirements that Jesus declared were necessary if one, if anyone, were to inherit the realm of God. One! One is the summary of the law, the totality of who and what we are to be as people of faith, as human beings, yes, might as well say it all together now, as saints. If anyone would apply for sainthood, would qualify for sainthood, being loving at the core of their being is essential, job one and following. If we are not loving, then we are not in any way saintly, no way a definition of saint!**

As I have noted on more than one occasion, the Gospel of Mark in many ways resembles the old *Reader's Digest*, giving a much more skeletal synopsis of the Jesus stories rather than providing a much more detailed, more fleshed-out, probably more embellished and exaggerated version of the texts as we find them in Matthew and Luke. Unlike the synoptics, which offer fuller, and thus longer, versions as Matthew and Luke describe various events in the life of Jesus, even including the power of parable and apocalyptic drama on occasion, Mark tends to give the reader "just the facts, ma'am," unlike one of my sermons, getting straight to the point of whatever the point of a text seeks to convey. In the story we have before us today, however, this is not the case, Mark's additions providing much more detail, what proves to be necessary information, essential material that somehow eluded the purview, or was accidentally or intentionally ignored by in the versions of the Gospels produced by Matthew and Luke. And we are the better for what Mark insightfully chose to include in his narrative, Matthew and Luke's omission a glaring oversight, what truly seems to be, what we might call, an editorial mistake. **As we pick up our story this morning, we find that Jesus has just finished another theological conversation with one or more unnamed individuals, Mark telling us that Jesus had been debating, concluding what appears to have been a daily part of the rabbi's routine, "debate" being the literal translation in this Markan text. Evidently, a scribe was eavesdropping and overheard their deep level of conversation, calm or as heated as it may have**

been, and was obviously impressed, perhaps even moved, with the answer Jesus gave to his unknown verbal sparring partner or partners.

The scribe asks Jesus a most salient, a very good, question indeed, this question being the final question of numerous questions we have read in preceding texts. It is as if the Markan writer had been building up to this climatic point, reaching a crescendo, the sum of all the previous inquiries. “Which commandment is the first of all?” Well, as we know full well from our readings from the Gospels, most questioners were seeking to test or trap Jesus, their questions by design intended to put him on the defensive, to make him prove to everybody concerned that he was legitimate, that he was the real thing and not an imposter, that he was exactly what he claimed to be, that he was not bragging or exaggerating, full of . . . hyperbole, that he knew his stuff. As a good friend of mine says, “If you can do it, it ain’t bragging!” To quote the late Arizona Cardinals coach Dennis Green, after a humiliating playoff loss several years ago, “They are who we thought they were!” Jesus was who they thought he was! And of course, Jesus always answered the bell, giving the right answer, making some happy, making some mad, some no doubt ambivalent, but always making his point.

Jesus responded with the answer for the ages, quoting directly from the Shema Israel, the “Hear, O Israel!” (Deuteronomy 6:5-6). The first commandment is clear, “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.” In other words, you are to love God with every fiber of your being, with every ounce of your person, no part of you exempted! But Jesus was not finished with what turned out to be a partial answer, one of two, the biblical equation of what it means to be a loving person still lacking, ironically incomplete at every level. There could and would never be one without the other! The Shema was an ancient declaration that was dutifully made, a religious devotion offered, at the time of awakening in the morning and the time of repose in the evening, every day without fail! Jesus quotes from Leviticus (19:18b), the book of Leviticus not being the most “quote-worthy” of biblical books, an unlikely source in our contemporary, progressive, minds, but a book rich in tradition and Torah, a book now usually cited to condemn, to prohibit,

things, many things. Yes, many of the 613 laws of Torah are cited in the Priestly book of Leviticus! The second commandment is found here, almost hidden in the textual weeds of do this, don't do that, yes, this pivotal law complementary and completing the first, call it half, carrying equal weight, and not only that, but inextricably inseparable from the first, fulfilling the first, two-in-one that must be read as one! There would never be one without the other! One without the other is an absolute impossibility! "You shall love your neighbor as yourself!" Jesus then adds, surely for affect, "There is no other commandment greater than these!" New Testament scholar R. Alan Culpepper, commenting on the Gospel of Mark, notes that, "The genius of Judaism is that it is singularly focused on the love of God—God's covenant love (*hesed*) and the obligation of the faithful to live out their love of God. Love here is not a feeling; it is the expression of one's defining commitments."<sup>1</sup> And love of God demands love of neighbor and love of neighbor means being neighborly, doing for others, attending to the needs of the last and least, meeting the needs of the first and greatest and everybody in between. The sum of our love for God and for everybody is the sum of our sainthood, the sum of our servanthood, the sum of our stewardship, the sum of our social justice, social justice a binding requirement, never arbitrary, a minimum, baseline, expectation. **By the way, I knew I would get stewarding the ship in the sermon somewhere!** Those who claim to preach the Bible without, or at the expense, of social justice make their homiletical proclamations from a very thin book, doing a disservice to their naïve listeners. Social justice is woven throughout the fabric of the biblical narrative. The Bible and social justice issues are inseparable! Culpepper adds, "One who has so experienced God's love as to be transformed by it will love others as naturally as if loving others were programmed into his or her genes. Those who are continually closed, hostile, suspicious, jealous, or resentful of others show that they have never really experienced love themselves."<sup>2</sup> And sadly, we see that sad and vengeful reality fully, transparently and painfully, yes, angrily, paraded on display by a legion of name-calling, name-taking zealots, loyal sycophants who seek retributive justice which is no justice at all. We see them everywhere these days, each and every day as they reveal who they are with everything they say and hope to do. It is hard to out-**rage** rage! **As**

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<sup>1</sup>R. Alan Culpepper, "Mark," in *Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*, (Macon, GA, 2007), 436.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 437

**Culpepper concludes, we are to “. . . teach others to love before they learn to hate.”<sup>3</sup> Good advice!**

Of the many things that make this text stand out in a good way, it is refreshing to read a story in which Jesus is not put in a compromised and/or adversarial position with his interlocutor, no attempt to back Jesus into a corner. The conversation is collegial, dialogical, politely productive, rather than full of incendiary, suspiciously motivated conspiratorial subterfuge. There is no accusatory judgment, no attempt to condemn or convict, no hint of a negative kind. Jesus and this scribe are mutually affirming of one another, most complimentary, perhaps surprisingly so to us based on what we know from our usual reading describing the way these discussions typically devolve. As one commentator notes, “After the hostility and blindness of various religious authorities, this story comes as a surprise,” I would suggest that this repartee even comes as a shock to our senses. As we read the Gospels, we brace ourselves! We have come to expect the worst, to be skeptical, no, cynical, as we relive Jesus’ various encounters with the religious types, those possessing presumed spiritual authority, who held ultimate sway over their obedient subjects. This scribe proves to be an exception! **Yes, this astute, most intuitively perceptive, scribe gives Jesus his props, recognizing that Jesus was most clairvoyant as well, more than intuitively perceptive, acknowledging in this humble, this lowly man from Nazareth a true teacher, one who indeed deserved the title, affectionately and respectfully called rabbi, amateur as he probably was, a name reserved for only the brightest among the theological bulbs.**

**The murderous Cain, sudden dramatic shift here, attempting to justify the evil slaying of his brother Abel, asks a question that seems trite and reactive, but truly conveys a deeper, more profound, message, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain sarcastically gave a most flippant and uncaring response, daring to arrogantly question the God who was still seeking him out, vigilantly searching for him like a prodigal father in search of a long-lost prodigal son, God never abandoning even the worst of the worst, always hopeful, always redeeming, always saving, always loving. Cain made what was a vain attempt to put some distance, to disassociate himself from his own flesh and blood. Cain disregarded and discarded his brother, dismissively removing even the remotest**

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

responsibility for his only named sibling, denying any accountability for the well-being of a fellow human being, a fellow traveler, related or not. The unasked, unspoken, question raised in this wonderfully eloquent dialogue we read in the Gospel of Mark today, is the same one graphically raised by an unrepentant Cain back in the day, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Am I my sister’s keeper? We all know the answer! This question is not complex, but is as simple as the air we breathe, something that should come naturally, without a first, much less a second, thought. The answer goes without saying but we must say it again anyway, and the answer is a resounding, unequivocal, no exceptions, “yes!” We are our brothers’ and our sisters’ keepers, every time, all the time! As we ponder sainthood today, a most mysteriously illusive concept, the definition of a saint is actually not that hard. We are saints when we are loving. We are not very saintly, not at all saint-like, not in the least a saint, when we are not loving! Jesus, no doubt impressed with this, shall we call him a scribe among scribes, ends their encounter by affirming, not only what the scribe said, but affirming his very person as well, something Jesus did with everyone he met as if that individual were the only person present, always receiving the undivided attention of the rabbi. And that affirmation and mutual affection was wonderfully reciprocal, a rarity in these Gospel musings. Jesus tells this scribe at the end of their encounter, this brief exchange, “You are not far from the realm of God!” May Jesus say that of all of us as well as we make our adventuresome journey into eternity! Mark concludes by declaring, “After that no one dared to ask him any question!” Any questions?

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and calls us to love, as simple and complex as loving always is! Amen and amen!