

October 29, 2017
Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 25, Year A, RCL
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Deuteronomy 34:1-12
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46

From today's reading from Matthew: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" [Jesus] said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus makes a similar declaration,¹ which he then follows with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus leaves us right here, suspended, with a wide opening to figure it out on our own. The Good Samaritan is hard to emulate; figuring it out on our own may be even harder.

Simply to be reading, a person must *read* the lines on the page in front of them. For a close reading, that person must also read *between* the lines. Full understanding requires us to notice what's there, and also what's *not*. When it comes to the Gospels, it's difficult enough to grasp what's there; it's an order of magnitude harder to grasp what's not.

Among many other omissions, what's not in the Gospels is instruction or information about the institutional church. The Gospels don't mention stained glass or vestments or organs. The Gospels don't mention budgets or committees. The Gospels *do* mention professional ministers like me, but only with scorn.

As they built "the church," the first followers of Jesus had to make it up as they went, based on their Jewish traditions and their understanding of Jesus. Those first Christ-followers read between the lines, and so must we, no matter that it's hard, no matter that we sometimes get it wrong. We return to those lines, remembering that what we do and say is—or at least should be—grounded in Jesus. Reflective of his Jewish roots, his core word is *love*: love of God and love of neighbor. To figure out what that means for us today, we have no option but to read between the lines.

For nearly 200 years, developments in transportation and communication have made our world smaller and smaller. Today, for all practical purposes, every single person on the globe is our neighbor. Given a couple of thousand dollars, we can reach out and literally touch almost anyone. Our neighbors are as near as the person sitting closest to you this morning; our neighbors are as far away as Malawi. This has implications for the church.

In this way and many others, Christianity has changed in recent years. The thing is, Christianity has *always* changed over time. It has been 2000 years since Christians had to fight lions in the Roman Coliseum. It has been only 60 years since American Christianity's glory days in the 1950s. We're still figuring out what to do. Then, we built churches to hold all the boomed babies; now, we have to manage the bust.

Or, we can reframe that and say, we *get* to manage the bust. Most of the time, I don't mind living in bust times. On my better days, I even prefer it. For one thing, it's new and interesting and exciting. For another, it's a chance to leave some baggage behind. Many of us carry at least some harm from the churches of our childhood, which tended to have little room for personal or theological differences. Other members of those churches weren't necessarily good neighbors to us. Perhaps they were unable to read between the Gospel lines. In these bust times, we are forced to reconsider and reimagine. That gives us the opportunity to do better.

As we think about how to do better, let's remember that the church is about receiving, *and* it's about sending. Each week, Sunday worship is a sort of staged mini-drama in which everyone participates. We come; we eat; we go. It's about us, *and* it's about so much more than us. To offer a few observations:

- The church is here to offer solace and pardon, in so far as it goes hand-in-hand with strength and renewal.
- The church is what you find *within* these walls, and what you take *beyond* these walls.
- The church is a center of spirituality and contemplation, in preparation for engagement and action.

our previous rector was here for over 30 years. During such a long tenure, the identity of the priest and the identity of the congregation become entwined. After the priest's departure, it is important for the people to explore and express the congregation's identity apart from its priest. I have tried to leave time and space for that. I have been with you now for almost two years. On this Stewardship Sunday, perhaps it's time to say more.

I was brought in to work with your lay leaders on two primary tasks: to stabilize the finances of the church and to renew its relationship with the Day School. I'm pretty certain there has been good progress. But those goals are not endpoints. Rather, they are the means to an end. The end is always to more fully become the Christian community that God needs in this place at this time.

To *that* end, here are some of the initiatives in progress, in no specific order:

- Developing relationships and partnerships with the Diocese, the area Episcopal churches, and our nearby ecumenical and interfaith partners
- Becoming a visible leader in and voice of the local justice movements, including those around immigration and race
- Renewing and creating ongoing partnerships with those already doing work with our neighbors near and far
- Understanding how best to engage those who are necessarily with us only for a short time, especially our seminarians
- Renewing our education programs for adults and children, and rebuilding our programs for youth
- Increasing liturgical participation, including providing opportunities to engage children and youth
- Improving the liturgy while maintaining our music
- Building systems of care for one another

- Improving communications, among ourselves and to the surrounding communities
- Learning how better to steward our physical and monetary assets for those to come
- Identifying new leaders, and developing those leaders and the systems and procedures needed to support them
- Establishing new practices and traditions for congregational welcome fellowship
- Understanding the synergistic relationship between the Church and the Day School, and learning how to use that to mutual advantage

For over 150 years, St. Thomas's has had stewards who cared for the church so that it could be passed from generation to generation. It's now our turn. St. Thomas's is a building, and it is so much more than a building. Today, we are the stewards of St. Thomas's. Our task is to help St. Thomas's be a church of the 21st century. Such a church is excellent in the foundations, such as liturgy, music and preaching, education, and spiritual formation, while also living and growing through deep engagement with God's ongoing reconciliation of all creation. Such a church is filled with people who embody and live up to the *true* Christian values: faith, hope, charity, and LOVE. Such a church is abuzz with energy.

I imagine what it looks like for St. Thomas's to fully occupy its place in THIS neighborhood, anchoring this section of Whitney Avenue. I imagine people hearing the name "St. Thomas's" and connecting it to the words *justice and goodness*. I imagine all the ways we can be ground-breakers, in the church and in the world. I hope the side-effect is that St. Thomas's is here for a good, long while.

In all this, your leaders need to hear your feedback. My door is nearly always open, literally and metaphorically. If you feel uncomfortable reaching out to me, then contact a warden or vestry member.

I know that many of you are new to the Episcopal Church. You may not understand the concept of stewardship. The bottom line is that *your* support sustains and grows this faith community. It's not about doing it because you *have* to; it's about doing it because you *want* to. This congregation possesses an abundance of gifts. Those gifts aren't like capital in a bank to be hoarded. Like the Good News of the Gospel our gifts from God are meant to be shared. In many cases, the value of a gift is realized only when given it to others.

"Joyful giving" may be a catchphrase, but it's true. I hope you love the Episcopal Church. I hope you love this church and the people who have found their way to this church. I hope you find deep joy in its stewardship.

Notes

¹ Luke 10: 25-28.