

Lev. 19:1-2,15-18 Ps. 1 1 Thess. 2:1-8 Matthew 22:34-46

Gracious God,
Take my lips and speak with them
Take our minds and think with them
Take our hearts and set them on fire
With love for you and all your people. *Amen*

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” To go even farther, in the story of The Good Samaritan, You shall love your enemy. In other words, love with every globule of your being. You shall.

You shall... On these 2 commandments hang all the law and prophets. It isn't just a neat summary of the law, or an original pithy saying of Jesus. These words had previously been instilled in the hearts and minds of the Israelites since Moses had received the law on Mt. Sinai. And that's also when the problems began; at least in *this* episode of how-to-be-the-people-of-God.

You see, some have felt that Aaron as the first High-Priest, never really got his fair share of acclaim. He was supposedly 'subordinate' to Moses, his brother. The Sadducees, whom Jesus just silenced, claimed their authority through this lineage, the priestly class designated as the Kohanim. And the Levites, of the tribe of Levi, were the laity in service of these priests.

The Sadducees came into being as a religio/politico movement around 167 BCE, as did their nemesis and rival party of the Pharisees. That's right, we're talking politics and not just religion.

The Sadducees were the conservative party. They were literalists, adhering to the written law only opposing the oral 'living-tradition' espoused by the Pharisees. Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection, angels, spirits/demons, or miracles.

That's why it's interesting to note that the portion of Leviticus that we hear today is concerned with ritual and moral holiness through justice of kin, neighbor and self. Why? Because the Lord is holy, God's people are to be holy. It's really not so much the content, of how to live, but rather, how you go about it and interpret it, that has caused so many problems.

Their rival, the Pharisees also sought holiness, even over the top holiness. Theirs was more of a prophetic than cultic stance. They traced their views back to Moses, developing a living-tradition of the elders which concretized the law, defined and interpreted matters not covered by it. Their platform was diametrically opposed to Sadducees. But really, both 'parties' wanted the same thing, ultimately; to be the called-people of God, and to walk in holiness according to God's law.

Pharisees had the support and goodwill of the people, encouraging something like the priesthood of all believers; in contrast to the elite, aristocratic Sadducees.

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Now if we were going with Track 1 of the lectionary, (we're hearing track 2) on this occasion, we would hear about the death of Moses in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy or 2nd law-giving is an account of Moses' work as legislator; supplementary and completing the revelation of covenantal law begun at Mt Horeb (Sinai) a generation before.

Because Moses is barred from entering the promised land, Deuteronomy is a response, an amplification of the law, enacted for the people as a normative guide to their corporate existence. "This interpretive key to the Pentateuch (Torah) is understood as a whole to preserve the abiding revelation of God's will for the ongoing life of the covenant people." (New Testament Use of the Old Testament) Deuteronomy has the dual character of helping the people to remember their past while preparing for their future.

On the other hand, let us consider Leviticus (which track 2 draws on in our readings today). The early rabbinical name for Leviticus is *Torat Kohanim* – The Priest's Manual, the cultic counterpart of the prophet. It was developed to address Israel's moral sins and physical impurities which were polluting sanctuary and defiling land leading to potential expulsion. Think of the 'Original Garden'! Think of Cain and Abel early in the history of humankind.

After Abel is murdered, the land is defiled and cursed by the blood of his brother spilt upon it, and Yahweh punishes Cain by condemning him to wander the earth for his remaining life.

So for a period of about 200 years, the rival parties lived. But by around 70 CE, when Matthew is written, the Sadducees are fading out and the Pharisees are morphing into rabbinical Judaism. In a nutshell? Politics and people come and go, but the living word of God endures forever!

Stepping into the moment of our gospel, After the previous hostile debate whereby Jesus had just shut down the Sadducees, after attempting to trap him about the question of Resurrection, which they don't believe in, has led to the Pharisees seeing an opportunity for themselves. It's like sibling rivalry on an institutional scale! Jesus can see right through their less than pure intentions.

Probably with an exasperated sigh, he responds to their 'test' on their question, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Of course, no one could dispute his very orthodox answer. It is at the heart of the Torah, at the start of The Shema, uttered several times per day by the devout, "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." (Deut. 6:4-5) You shall!

Jesus' genius lies in his connecting law from Leviticus too. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." You shall! Jesus has in essence drawn from the very sources out of which the rival factions grew; Deuteronomy (the prophetic – the Moses camp) and Leviticus (the priestly- the Aaron camp). We need the fullness of God's Word. Not just one camp or the other! "Both represent the Israelites before God. Both intercede on their behalf, one through ritual, the other through prayer. The welfare of Israel depends on both a Moses and Aaron." (Harper Collins Study Bible, p. 150)

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Jesus points out that it's a win/win situation. Why seek to divide? Instead, reach across the aisle and invest in understanding what unites the people of God! Sadly, the worlds leaders more often strive to divide and conquer- as it plays out in the story of our Lord.

After Jesus trips up the Pharisees with their finite understanding of the Messiah's lineage, "Whose son is he?" and with his brilliant interpretation of Ps. 110:1 employed, Jesus' logic and scriptural authority is irrefutable, game over. After that, no one dares ask him any more questions. From then on, the rivals have joined forces to get rid of Jesus, the bigger enemy that can't be trapped, so he must be killed.

You shall not kill.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall, love God with every fiber of your being.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

On this hangs all the law and prophets. No divided camps.

One camp – the people of God.

Amma Susan+