

**Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**October 26, 2008**

Proper 25A 2008

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Our readings today are readings of change and transition. In our OT reading we go to the last chapter of Deuteronomy, actually the very last words of the entire five books of the Torah, to pause and ponder the death of Moses and with him to look out over the horizon to the Promised Land. The Israelites are poised to cross the Jordan and occupy the lands promised to Abraham. From Mount Nebo, God shows him the land to which Moses led his people but tells Moses that, like all others of his generation, he shall not enter. Instead, Moses, at the Lord's command, dies in the land of Moab. The story makes clear that he was still vigorous at 120 years old to emphasize that he died at the Lord's command. It also makes clear that his burial place is "still unknown to this day". The Jewish Tanak Bible translates the Hebrew so that the Lord himself buried Moses. The Torah ends with a tribute to Moses: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face."

Have any of you ever walked along any of our mountain ridges? It is amazing as you stand on firm ground but watch the land drop down and away from you on each side. There Moses is at the time of his death on that fine line separating the past and the future as he is about to join the Lord in the eternal present. It reminds me that in the Bible we humans, individually and generationally, are only character actors. The story is really about God. The torch is passed to Joshua and his generation. The death of

Moses is not just about Moses. It is the close of one chapter of God's relationship with humanity and the opening of another movement of God: the movement to introduce divine ideals into human societies.

In our Gospel lesson we see the last encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees. It is their last attempt to discredit Jesus and the authority of his teaching. He is asked by a Pharisee, "which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Now there are 613 distinct commandments in the law and the Pharisees believed observance of each to be equally critically important. It is a set-up question and it goes to how we use scripture.

Do you know anyone who uses Scripture like a Ouiji Board or a Crazy 8 Ball? It reminds me of the story of man who sought guidance from the Bible and opened it up and pointed his finger on the page. It landed on "Judas ran out and hanged himself." Well that wasn't very helpful, so he did it again and landed on "Go thou and do likewise." Well that wouldn't do so he tried it again and came up with, "What you must do, do quickly." It is a story that demonstrates reading the Bible out of context and with an uncritical mind leads to absurd results or used to justify almost anything.

Jesus avoids the trap set for him and in the process teaches us with authority about reading Scripture. He teaches that Scripture cannot be separated from God's plans and God's continuing involvement and care for us and all Creation. In other words, we have to take ourselves and the reality of our lives into the Bible.

In this lesson, Jesus first gives a re-interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:5 - "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." It is called the Shema, a prayer centered in the Covenant of the Jewish people with God and one central to Jewish worship and life in Jesus' time and still today. But if you look at Deut. 6:5 you'll see it reads "with all your heart and with all

your soul and with all your *might*.” Jesus changed the text thus emphasizing that we must bring our entire self including our minds into our relationship with God. Next, Jesus joins this commandment with another one from Leviticus 19:18 – “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” By joining these two commandments from different books of the Bible and from different times in Israel’s history, Jesus is not just restating the law but he is reinterpreting it.

The core of the Law as Jesus teaches is love. Now we aren’t talking about love as warm and fuzzy feelings or being well disposed towards the object of affection. What Jesus is talking about is relationship – being integrally connected to and with the other. To love God and to love neighbor are not two separate commandments. They are not even two serial commandments – love God first and then show it by loving the neighbor or vice-versa. Jesus links the two so that they are two sides of the commandment to love. We are all recipients of God’s love and at the same time are conduits of God’s Love in our relationships with our neighbors.

In answering the lawyer’s question Jesus not only interprets the law but makes clear that God’s love enters via our relationships with one another and is not something separate. It is an implicit criticism of a society that does not seek to reflect divine justice and peace.

Jesus now responds to the lawyer’s silence by asking his own question of the Pharisees, “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” As expected, they answer, “David’s”. Like most people, they are looking backwards, expecting the Messiah to restore what had been Israel’s glory that existed a thousand years before. Jesus challenges this expectation by the paradox of David’s expectation of the

Messiah as Lord. How can the elder, the father, call the son, the one who comes after, “Lord”? Jesus points out that in this quote from the 110<sup>th</sup> Psalm David understood that the Messiah would be human in the present and of his lineage yet at the same time precede him in relationship with God. It was this that silenced Jesus’ critics. It challenged not only their expectations of the Messiah but also their understanding of God.

Now I have some sympathy for those Pharisees. One of the hardest things for us to do is to unlearn things. When I took up the game of squash for phys ed in college, the coach asked me if I had ever played before. When I told him, “no,” he said, “Oh thank God, we won’t have to spend all that time unlearning bad habits!” It is especially difficult to unlearn things that our culture teaches as true. But we often have to unlearn some things in order to have a mind open enough to see other ideas or ways of being and doing.

Jesus challenged his culture and its assumptions and the Living Christ continues to challenge every culture and generation He encounters. It is what is unique about Christianity – we believe that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine and that through, with and in Christ we, too, are brought into God’s life to be a people of hope, justice and love.

When we accept that truth, everything changes. Hope replaces fear. We come to realize that it’s not all at the Mall and that we are vehicles of God’s grace and justice. If that is true, then no person is unimportant.

Amen.