

Pentecost 21 October 25, 2020. Proper 25

The news reported this week that there are still 545 children still in custody of the U.S. Government because their parents cannot be located after they were deported is just awful. The family separation plan for dealing with undocumented immigrants to the country was terrible when it was first publicly unveiled in 2018. Thousands of children were taken from their parents, including nursing infants, and many were detained in totally inadequate facilities. This program, originally developed in the White House, was implemented by former Attorney General William Sessions. There was a tremendous reaction against this policy, public demonstrations, marches, letters to public officials and media. The Episcopal Church and other major denominations went on record to denounce this policy of family separations, and in a few months the policy was ended. However, as we learned this week, that did not end the problem: during the family separation parents were deported and now the families cannot be re-united. It turns out that the government agencies charged with carrying out family separation did not keep very good records and so it is difficult to trace where the parents are now. Also, even though the U.S. government is responsible for the implementation of the family separation policy, it is the American Civil Liberties Union and other volunteer groups who represent the children that were charged with finding the parents. Once again, I am reminded of just how cruel and

injustice this policy is, and that the terrible story is not over for more than 500 families. This tragic situation, and yet it was fully preventable, shows first why our prayers are needed and why we must also pray for change to avoid this type of tragedy in the future.

Prayer: O wonderful God, this morning open our hearts and minds to your word to guide us into the fullness of your love; this we ask in the Name of Jesus, our savior and friend. Amen.

Yesterday Elizabeth and I (and Zadie our dog, too!) hiked up Mount Elmore and saw the balancing rock, so I feel some up close kinship with today's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, when we hear the words from the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses ascends Mount Pisgah to survey the land the people will inhabit just before he dies prior to their crossing the River Jordan into the Promised Land. As I said in an earlier sermon a few weeks ago when we heard the lesson from Exodus about the giving of the Ten Commandments, they are given as a teaching, to guide the people in their life together as they are formed into a new community. Remember, this group, wandering in the wilderness, longing for the fleshpots of Egypt, were a rag tag band of newly freed slaves, brought out of their bondage and oppression in Egypt, brought out from the genocide they endured at the hands of their Egyptian slave masters and terrified they fled before Pharaoh's mighty army, expecting at any moment to be cut down and massacred. Out of the trauma and terror they experienced, God sought

to form them into a free community, a community which would worship the Lord God Almighty who brought them into their freedom and a community that would manifest the glory of God through their just and compassionate treatment of each other. To this end, Moses, their leader, is given the Ten Commandments to form this rag tag band of former slaves into a community that embodied what it is to be the people of God.

And so, throughout the history of Israel, these commandments held sway for the formation of the community, as a touchstone or foundation for the people of Israel as the chosen people of God. And so these commandments have maintained an important place in the Church as well. In many older churches, both in England and in America often had two panels up on the reredos behind the altar: one panel had the Ten Commandments and the other was the Lord's Prayer. And, as I'm sure you will recall, we recite the Ten Commandments at the beginning of our worship services during the Lenten season.

And of course, Jesus as a teacher, a rabbi for his people, would have been very familiar with this history and this context: and as we have been following Jesus this last few weeks in his discussions with the religious authorities of his day at the Temple in Jerusalem, it should come as no real surprise that the meaning of the Law, the Torah, for Israel, should come into the discussions, too. As we have seen over the past several weeks, Jesus is tested by the religious authorities of his day: finally the question

revolves around the primary commandment: being the good teacher that he is, Jesus takes a fairly simple list of ten, enough to remember by the fingers of our hands, and breaks it down to a simple two: just like the two hands we have: Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus takes these two commandments from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy and from the eighteenth chapter of Leviticus, and in doing so he sums up the Ten Commandments in a positive framework: moving from the “Thou Shalt nots” to a much more imperative format: rather than being prohibitive, Jesus is proscriptive in his teachings: “This is what you should do and these actions shall characterize your life!” Jesus tells us, this is how you shall live on the way, to be my followers, put your love in action: love God and love your neighbors. Make this love the center of your life, the love that gives you life itself.

I am so appreciative of this teaching Jesus gives. Yes, simple and to the point, but not easy by any means: but this simple teaching does lay out for me, for all of us I believe, the direction and trajectory of our lives: like I said, simple, but not easy.

One of the reasons I happen to like celebrating funerals is that it leads me to think about death and life, what is the significance of life and death in our lives before God. This came home to me again recently at a funeral as I got into a discussion with one of the staff members of the funeral home here in Barre. John is a very kind, very thoughtful man, and

discussing life and the state of the world now, he said, “The problem is selfishness.” I think this is pretty close: thinking of ourselves, thinking of our own benefit and putting the value of our lives and our needs and desires above others is indeed the problem. That’s the lesson Jesus is teaching us here: love God, with everything you have and all that you are, and love your neighbor as yourself: all that you want for yourself, all that you need and desire, love those around you in the same way, love those Jesus calls, “the least of these,” and putting this love into action, making this love concrete and real in your life, that is how we show that love of God in all we do and with all we are. So simple yes, “Love God; Love your neighbor.” Simple but not easy: but putting once foot in front of the other, taking just one step at a time, that is how we love our neighbor and how we show our love for God. I really like Jesus' lesson in the discussion with the Pharisees: I really like how Jesus shows us that these commandments are not a heavy, oppressive burden, but a freeing prayer, an opening of the soul to the fullness, the richness and the abundance of divine love....but still there is always one thing that hangs up here for me: unlike the Ten Commandments, with their prohibitive content, “Thou shalt not...,” Jesus' summary of the teachings of the Torah are a call to action, and a call to action of a particular sort: a call to love. Indeed, even more than a call to love, this is a command to love: love in the imperative. But how do we do that? How can love be commanded? How can love be

demanded from us? Well indeed, that is just the thing: we can pray that God will make us love what God commands, as we do in our prayer for this Sunday that we will pray together later in this service; love can be demanded of us, because in Jesus we have been loved by God. In Jesus, we have been given the fullness of God's love, the very richness of God's love and the abundance of God's love: in Jesus, God has given God's own self to us in love that we would love others, that we would give ourselves for others just as in Jesus God has given God's own self for us. And so, loving our neighbor as our own selves, providing and caring for our neighbors, putting the Mission Statement of our parish into action by caring for others in and outside this Church, we show as well our love of God, by providing for and loving the children of God. Yes, loving God and loving our neighbors, these are commandments, but they are so much more for us: this is a divine prayer for our lives: setting us on a course of loving service in the Name of the Risen Christ; indeed a deep and abundant grace for our lives as we struggle to live faithfully in this life, in the midst of all the struggles and uncertainties.

And so, my sisters and brothers, and so as we continue in our worship here this morning, gathering in prayer and in the presence of Christ in our midst, we gather as well as those who are loved into loving, loved by God in Christ Jesus that we might love back just as fiercely and just as

completely. Thanks be to God for God's steadfast love and thanks be to Christ bringing that love to you and me. Amen.