

**Sermon:** Before I begin my sermon, I hope that all of you will be voting on Tuesday. Voting is one of the great privileges and responsibilities of the citizens of our nation, and I hope you will be diligent in getting yourself to the poll and casting your vote. And if you want to know who to vote for, please see me after the service!

When it came time to recognize the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my Ordination to Christian Ministry, the New Hampshire Conference sent an email, asking me to write a few words about my ministry in the United Church of Christ - places where I'd served as Pastor, recognitions and honors received, and stories or anecdotes that might interest my colleagues gathered for the retired clergy luncheon. Missing from their request was a question about people who might have been helpful in important ways in my ministry - family that supported me during difficult moments, denominational leaders who saw gifts in me that I couldn't see and who encouraged me at crucial moments in my ministry, and teachers who inspired me with unusual insights or affirmation of my skills. In other words, the Conference didn't think to ask about the saints who had loved me, and encouraged me in important ways. And so I answered a question they hadn't asked, and named just a few of those persons - my 'Cloud of Witnesses,' as the author of Hebrews would have said: I named Nirmala, Everett, Jake, Elwin, Ellis, Gail D., Helmut, Elizabeth, and Francois, realizing that in naming some, I was omitting many from my list. But I knew that absent these saints, I would have not grown into my calling as a minister or as a Christian. Perhaps you have enjoyed the blessing your own 'cloud of witnesses,' saints that have changed your life for the better. May God bless all those who have been Saints to us on this special All Saints Sunday.

In the October 25, 2000 issue of the *Christian Century*, Robin Meyers writes, "I recently had the chance to meet Sister Helen Prejean (pray-Zhahn), author of *Dead Man Walking*, recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Amid the restaurant noise and secondhand smoke, I realized that I was in the presence of a saint. I wanted to say something to her, something to indicate how important this moment was to me, but it would have come out all wrong—like a blubbering paraphrase of what she had already said. Besides, I knew the answer before I asked the question, or maybe I just couldn't figure out how to address a question to the answer. All I knew for sure was that I felt close. Dangerously close to the kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

Something of that feeling of being 'dangerously close to the kingdom' may have effected the young man in today's Gospel Lesson. Having heard Jesus argue persuasively with his religious elders, the young man senses he is in the presence of an extraordinary person - a 'saint.' And so he approaches Jesus and asks a challenging question - the kind of question that he knew the prophets, poets, and priests of his religion were already wrestling with, "What is the greatest commandment?" Which is a way of asking, 'Who is God, and what does God expect from ordinary human beings?' The young man knew that Moses, the great lawgiver, would answer his question by saying that God is the lawgiver, and

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer, Robin R. "Extra credit: Sunday, November 5 (Mark 12:28-34)." *Christian Century* (Oct. 25, 2000).

God expects us to follow the commandments. The young questioner knew that Micah, the great prophet, would answer that God is a God of Justice, and the God of Justice expects us to 'do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.' (Micah 6:6-8). Though the young man is aware of these answers to the question, he is interested in knowing what Jesus thinks. And so Jesus answers, saying, 'God is One.' In saying that, Jesus is acknowledging that his God is Israel's God, the God who called the worlds into being, the God who created humankind in God's image, and - as our Statement of Faith has it, the One who set before us the ways of life and death. And what does this God require of us? 'That we love,' Jesus replies. 'That we love God and love our neighbor.' Answers that are at once hopeful, and at the same time frustrating.

Hopeful, in that pleasing God isn't about keeping rules, the 631 laws of Israel that the young questioner was surely aware of. Hopeful, in that pleasing God isn't dependent on having enough faith, or about getting rid of doubt. Frustrating, though, for how do we know when we are actually loving our God, and neighbor? And, as another once asked, 'who is our neighbor, anyway?'

To my way of thinking, loving God is about allowing room in one's mind for faith. Loving God has to do with being sensitive to the many ways in which God comes close. Loving God is honoring the inner voice that encourages us to believe we are beloved, that we are worthy of love, that we are cherished beyond words. Loving God is also about paying attention to the voice of conscience, the Spirit forbidding the thing that would harm us or harm another. Loving God is allowing the soul to yearn for deeper meaning and a deeper connection to the eternal. In short, loving God is about giving place to the God who wills to abide with us.

Aristotle Papanikoraou, who teaches a course on 'Faith and Critical Reason' to undergraduates at Fordham university, offers an interesting twist on Jesus' response in his article titled 'How I Teach Theology to Undergrads.' He writes, "Being religious is not about a set of rules that one must follow or a set of propositions to which one must assent. It is first and foremost an art form; an expression of beauty that is also truth and goodness. The rules and propositions of the tradition - and every tradition has its rules and propositions - aim at the production of the person as a work of art."<sup>2</sup> Religion has historically inspired great art, but in Papanikoraou's thinking the outcome of Christian faith in the human is a work of art, a thing of beauty. How wonderful!

"Love the Lord your God," Jesus says, 'and love your neighbor as yourself.' The importance of this becomes clear in Matthew's parable of the great judgment, where all of humankind is gathered before God, and divided into those who have pleased God and those who have displeased God. To those who have pleased God, the judge of the world says: 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I

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<sup>2</sup> Papanikoraou, Aristotle. "How I Teach Theology to Undergrads." *Christian Century* (April 15, 2017).

"Something We Can Do!"  
Hebrews 12:1-4 and Mark 12:28-34

was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' (Matthew 25:34b-36) Helping the sick, the hungry, the naked, and those in prison is something that we can do, and many of us do already.

These actions, however, assume an able-bodied person with resources. What of those, some of whom may be in this congregation today, or watching the service on Zoom, who are not able bodied, or who lack resources with which to help another? Jesus might suggest simply doing what is possible, given your circumstances: offering a word of praise or expression of gratitude to those who care for you, or taking time each day to breathe a prayer of blessing for those about you. Doing simple acts of kindness will be enough.

It should by now be obvious that what God is endeavoring to do through Jesus is to make of us a community of saints, a people of God's own who will continue the tradition of being there for others, making a positive difference in our communities and the larger world, and living as little Christs in our time and place. Something, I think, most of us can do. And, it will be enough. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace.

Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.