



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 25A, OCTOBER 25, 2020  
DEUTERONOMY 34:1-12; PSALM 90:1-6, 13-17; MATTHEW 22:33-46

## JESUS, WHAT COMES NEXT?

**Matthew 22:34-46** *[When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He 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." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.]*

*Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.]*

This is the right word for today.

Here. Now.

On the eve of an election at the edge of the wildfire and the rising sea in the heat of uprising – stalked by plague and wracked with grief for all we have lost, we return to the heart of the gospel. The Great Commission. Jesus, telling us as plainly as he ever will, what to do.

It is the only prayer I've been able to make lately.

Jesus tell me what to do.

And Jesus – God with a body, God who experienced violence and hunger and pain and death – says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Funny thing about "You shall."

Sometimes... I just actually shan't. Can't. Won't. Don't particularly want to. Keeping it all together feels like a lot lately, and frankly? Sometimes I'd rather not have to worry about anybody else. Loving my neighbor, and even loving God, can be pretty far from my mind, and even farther from my to-do list.

But there's another funny thing about "you shall."

The verb here, "You shall love"? It's not an imperative. Jesus says it's a commandment, but it isn't phrased that way grammatically. It isn't, 'Do this' or 'You must do this' or even 'you should' as an instruction. It's an indicative. It's a plain, future tense statement of fact. You *will* love God. You *will* love your neighbor.

This passage doesn't just answer the prayer, "Jesus, tell us what to do." It answers the prayer, "Jesus, tell us what comes next."

And that should probably scare you.

As my wife and I were preparing to travel to Seattle from our home in the Bay Area, we carefully weighed the COVID risks. How many rest stops would we need? How many stops for gas? How could we protect ourselves and the communities we would pass through and the loved ones we were traveling to see?

As we planned, our windows were shut tight against an orange sky. Wildfire consumed vast swaths of the west coast. At home and along 1,000 miles of I-5, the air was unsafe to breathe. We looked up alternate routes and anticipated having to turn back and scrap the whole thing.

And then news broke of armed militias – self-appointed vigilantes – enforcing evacuation orders, setting up roadblocks, and patrolling the empty streets in small towns in Oregon.

And I got scared. Suddenly I felt small and exposed and conspicuously vulnerable in a

way I do not often feel. The risks were real and out of my control, and I wasn't certain I could ensure my own safety on what was once a simple trip.

Fear like that has been more and more a part of my conversations lately.

Every day I talk to people more frightened of the future than they have ever been. People used to solid ground are staring down financial ruin, political upheaval, and the inability to rely on institutions, paychecks, relationships, and even their own bodies, in the ways they always have.

Maybe you have also felt some of these fears afresh recently.

My fears in this moment tell me to pay attention. If something is changing, it is the ubiquity of vulnerability and instability. It is the likelihood of violence's impact on my life. But the existence of this peril is not new.

Maybe these fears have been a very present part of your life for a long time.

Because of course for many people, driving through northern California and rural Oregon has never been simple or safe. Many people – Black people, immigrants, queer and trans folks, people with disabilities – have always had to think about their conspicuous vulnerability and plan carefully how to travel and where to stop safely for the night.

In a conversation with my colleague Oshalla about the militias and the election, she said, "Why are people acting like fascism is something new? It's not like it's going to

happen; it's happening. We are living under oppression now. We have been."

By we, Oshalla means Black people in the United States. She means people who have always been subject to cruel vigilante violence. To displacement. To air so polluted it is unsafe to breathe. People who have never been able to trust that wealth or plans or education or their government will protect them, their vote, their families, or their lives. By we, Oshalla means her neighbors. She means mine.

I have known about these realities for some time now. But I have not always addressed them as if they were mine. I have not always deeply felt them. Perhaps this is also true for some of you.

Where we come from positions of privilege, or safety or control, loving our neighbors may not feel like a warm embrace. It might taste like copper and adrenaline and panic. It might require precarity. Unmooring ourselves, bit by bit, from the protections that anchor us but are not God. Opening our fists and relinquishing – or admitting we do not have – control.

It requires that most dangerous kind of Christ-like freedom.

Loving our neighbors means interrupting the hurtful joke, the casual harassment, the racist pattern, risking prestige and awkwardness and becoming targets ourselves. It means joining the rent strike, putting our credit history and housing on the line and feeling the full force of a retaliatory landlord's ire.

Loving our neighbor means those of us with white bodies preparing physically and spiritually to shield Black bodies from those who would do them harm.

In short, it means making our neighbors' problems our problem. You will love your neighbor as yourself.

And this is inextricably connected, at the center of this holy text, to how we will love God.

Despite our fears, people familiar with precarity and oppression tell us over and over that God is present there. When we read the Beatitudes next week, we might find God is *especially* present there, under conditions of poverty, oppression, grief, and the losing side of occupation and empire and power.

The real question is, do we love God enough to believe it? Like, really believe it?

Do any of us desire closeness with God enough to *aspire* to precarity? To run forward, arms open, to embrace the reckoning that is coming? Would we do it if we knew it would help us love our neighbor?

Surely that will take loving the Lord our God with all our hearts and all our souls and all our minds.

It will take loving God so much that we no longer fear losing the other things that we think are keeping us safe. It will take loving God more than the protections that distance us from our neighbors who have already lost or never had them.

What comes next might take many forms. But, if we embrace what comes and one another, God will set us free from fear.

The Right Reverend Steven Charleston, a Choctaw Episcopal Priest, and former president of Episcopal Divinity School wrote recently of these times, ““...Something sacred is coming this way. That is how my ancestors would have said it. In the midst of all this turmoil and confusion,” he writes, “when we feel trapped in a situation we cannot control, the wise elders of my holy heritage would climb to the high place... They would not shrink into a corner afraid, but rise up to catch the first light of what was coming into being all around them...”

The world is full of the fear of birth and change, but that transformation will one day be our blessing.

Do not be afraid, but be believing.

Come and see.

Something sacred is coming this way...”

Climb to your high place, my friends. Rise up to meet the transformation that will one day be our blessing.

This is our moment to shed what does not serve us. That which does not serve God and love of neighbor.

If you have something to lose, don't be afraid. You will love God. And you will love your neighbor as yourself.



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