

**Sermon for Sunday, October 29, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley**

It was a question  
that you might not expect to hear,  
a question  
that is certainly far from the minds of most of us today.  
“Tell me,” the religious lawyer said, “which of the laws is the most important one to keep?”

It was one of those days. The leaders had been trying to trap Jesus, arguing among themselves, throwing questions at him in the hope that he might say something stupid. One misstep and they would have grounds to arrest him and charge him. And what a great question. How could anyone choose from the six hundred and thirteen laws that guided every dimension of Jewish life? What right could this man claim to choose just one above all the others?

“Teacher, which of the laws is the most important?”

And Jesus looked at him, and answered,  
“To love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself.”

Every morning, the first thing they did  
when they got up  
was to recite those words.  
“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind.” The Shema, it was called, and Jesus put it rightly at the very heart of faith. And then added another well known law, to love your neighbor as yourself.

Two laws  
that together summed up the whole of Jewish religious practice. Two laws, that summed up Jewish history. Two laws  
that shape the whole way you face the world  
and every part of life within it.

When you compare Jesus’s summary

with the idea of keeping six hundred and thirteen laws,  
it all seems pretty simple.

Just two things:  
to love God,  
and to love one another.

So why do we find it all so hard?

Because the reality is, that if we're honest, our love for one another is patchy, and our love for God...  
well, its one of those things  
that we'd really rather not talk about. Keep it private, I suspect so that no one really knows  
how difficult it is.

To love God with all of our hearts and souls and minds.  
It sounds good, it rolls easily off our tongues,  
but what does that really look like?  
How on earth does one love a God  
who we do not see,  
a God  
who we can't touch?

I guess the easy way out  
is to say that we love God  
by loving one another. That the first great commandment is contained in the second,  
and vice-versa.  
That's kind of true,  
but I don't think that rolling the two in together  
is quite what Jesus was talking about.

Loving the Lord our God  
with all our heart and soul and mind.  
The way that some Jews have done it over the centuries, is to tie little containers with the law written in them on their arms and heads, to keep the memory of God close to their minds and hands, to write reminders on their doorposts, to develop a habit of attentiveness  
to the things  
of God. And its that kind of attentiveness

that Jesus is talking about now.

A habit

of attentiveness to God,

a habit of attentiveness

that we as Christians

are to cultivate — not as a matter of law, but because it's the way to a relationship with God, it's the way to love.

It's why there was the tradition in monasteries of saying prayers up to eight times per day — at sunrise, in the first hour of daylight, at the third, sixth and ninth hours, at the end of the day, at bed time, and some time in the night. It wasn't just to be extra holy, or because God demanded it, but really, at its heart, so that they would be mindful of God, attentive to God, throughout the whole of the day.

I doubt any of us here pray the monastic offices today, but there are other ways of being attentive to God.

At the very center

is our weekly Sunday worship of God.

The early Christians chose Sunday to meet

because it was the day that Christ rose from the dead. Sunday is the day of resurrection, so that every week, we gather and celebrate not only Christ's new life, but ours as well, the new life that comes to us with forgiveness and healing.

Week by week

we hear the word of God read in Scripture and proclaimed in the sermon,

week by week we come to God in prayers of thanksgiving and intercession,

week by week we confess our sins, the things we have done wrong, and are assured of God's forgiveness,

week by week, we offer to God some of the money we have earned, a token in thanksgiving for the many gifts God has given us,

week by week

we share in the Eucharist, the thanksgiving, the Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ, and meet him

face to face.

Here, for one precious hour

we are free to love God with all of our hearts and souls and minds, with the whole of ourselves.

That's what it is talking about, in the baptismal covenant, in words that come from a description of the early church in acts chapter two, which bible study looked at this week,

when it asks,

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?”

And we all answer, “I will, with God’s help.”

Promising to be regular in our worship, Sunday by Sunday, loving God with our hearts and souls and minds.

And we say it, not only for ourselves, but for those who we bring to be baptized. For our children to be attentive to God, they need to worship regularly alongside us. And even though sometimes they seem to be more interested in eating Cheerios™, or drawing pictures, they know what is going on. Look at their drawings, and see how often Jesus appears. Watch their faces as they come up to eat the bread of life, the bread that especially belongs to their friend Jesus.

Some of my earliest memories are of sitting on the floor, squished between my pew and the front of the next one, looking at the prayer book. I don’t know if I could even read; what I know is that sitting there beside my father’s legs and in the presence of my God, was the safest, best place, I knew to be. Loving God with my heart and soul and mind.

But then we walk out of the doors.

And it’s all too easy to lose the habit of attentiveness to God.

And so we have reminders. One of the traditions of the Episcopal Church, like many other Christians, is to begin and end each day with prayer and bible reading. I remember as a little kid, the ritual of getting ready for bed each night. First of all, my father would bring in two quarters of granny smith apple with the core taken out — my brother got the other half — and a glass of milk. Then we would sit down and read a bible story, and pray together.

That practice of praying at night is known in our prayer book as Compline.

There’s also a short version, which we use for evening meetings here at St James. Just as there’s a short form of morning prayer in the prayer book. To remind us to be attentive to God.

There are all sorts of other ways to remind us. Things like giving thanks before we eat, or wearing a cross.

All of them, to help us to remember  
to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and minds.

It all sounds kind of prosaic. And yet, as we do these things, our minds and hearts and souls and lives will begin to pay attention to God, begin to recognize God around us, begin to seek out God in everything we say and do.

One of my favorite poems, which is also a hymn, was written by George Herbert, a priest in the early 17th century. It seems to capture that sense of attentive seeking for God:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:  
Such a Way, as gives us breath:  
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:  
Such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:  
Such a Light, as shows a feast:  
Such a Feast, as mends in length:  
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:  
Such a Joy, as none can move:  
Such a Love, as none can part:  
Such a Heart, as joys in love.

It's not laws that make us Christian. It's not even the rituals. They are only signs of our faith, ways in which God reaches us and touches us.

But what really makes us Christian is love. As we pay attention to God, we invite that love into our hearts, and souls and minds, love that fills us and consumes us spilling over from the heart of God, our Way, our Light, our Joy, our Love.