

*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad* - "Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One." This is the beginning of the prayer that has begun synagogue worship for centuries; the prayer that faithful Jews still recite daily. The second part of prayer is the same response Jesus gave to his tempter in the desert: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind," or in the Greek, "...with all your understanding."

Jesus was both a deeply orthodox Jew and a prophetic challenger of local practices. In the passage just before this reading, Jesus has silenced representatives of the Sadducees. Now he challenges representatives of the Pharisees—his own tribe. Remember that Jesus is teaching in the midst of a turbulent Jewish renewal, and his response to being questioned is to refer to the most fundamental, ancient and widely recited scripture in Jewish practice. Jesus cites this prayer, the *sh'ma*, as a corrective—a reminder of what is most important.

Jesus offers the ancient reminder as a prophetic challenge that bursts the seams of the customs that prevent those outside the community from the knowledge and love of God. Rather than shaming any of his Jewish brothers or sisters, Jesus is reminding people who are doing their best to be faithful that, as Episcopalian author Nancy Rockwell puts it: "no law, no rule, no piety, no custom, no culture, no tradition, is more important than loving God completely. And God cannot be contained in one law, one rule, one piety, one custom, one culture or tradition, but can only be contained in all the world – and any soul."

The two commandments inform one another: The first and the greatest commandment captures the aim of Torah, which is to orient the people's entire life toward God. The second, a consequence of the first, implies that one cannot love God without loving what God loves. And to love what God loves—that is to say—to love all creation, all humanity, without boundaries, without conditions, without discrimination—to love as God loves *us* requires that we put God *first* with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the writing of Pastor Timothy Beach-Verhey, professor of Theological Ethics at Davidson College.

Our own individual desires and preferences are not are not trivial, unwelcome or inappropriate. But they can never be the first priority nor can they even be the second priority. God's purpose transcends any particular community's particular preferences and identities, and so must come first. What comes second is *like* the first, but is not its equal. In the language of our own catechism, our *second* priority is "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."

Jesus refuses to identify love of God with any one community. Jesus leaves his intensely nationalistic questioners speechless in the face of profoundly good news that they cannot yet process. And if we imagine that we have *fully* processed this same good news, we need to stop and reconsider. Giving to God what is God's, loving our neighbors as ourselves, is a peculiar practice. So peculiar, in fact, that we routinely need to be reminded that these are the ways that God renews the world. God needs us to seek and find God's image in our neighbors—and even in our enemies, which we cannot do without putting God ahead of every other loyalty.

As we begin the work of renewal at St Elizabeth, we are not so different from the devout and faithful Jews that Jesus spoke to in the midst of their renewal. Jesus's prophetic challenge is for us. How do we cultivate an undivided heart capable of returning unbounded love to God and of seeking to love our neighbors, and even our enemies? We come into this holy space to offer back to God the love God has given us. Here in this place, we practice loving God with all that we are and all that we have. We intentionally set the outside world apart for a brief time, so that we can return to it refilled with God's presence.

When we step through the front door of this church, we enter an in-between space, the narthex. It is more than a lobby. That narthex is a transition space that allows, in fact, asks us to leave the outer world behind and to enter an inner world. To leave worldly time behind and to enter Godly timelessness. To leave the world of relentless activity—from the life-affirming joy of a newborn's smile to the life-destroying horror of a 15-year-old child with a handgun—we leave *all* that at the door for a moment to enter the silence and stillness of a consecrated place. God is present in both worlds, of course, but *this* place is set apart from *that* place so that we can more immediately experience God, to take ourselves more deeply into the mystery of God and to rededicate ourselves before returning to the marketplace to serve God in others.

There is a Benedictine practice called *statio* that acknowledges the importance of transitions of all kinds – a practice that honors the times between times – but especially in the transitions into sacred space. If we do not come together into holy spaces, we can easily lose sight of the grace moving silently beneath everything in our daily life. We can lose sight of the precious gifts of relationship, family and home. It is precisely for this reason that Anglicans sit in small moments of silence after the sermon or before the confession. It is the reason that many Anglo-Catholics dip their fingers into holy water to mark the transition into sacred space for worship and then back out into the world.

Benedictine sister Joan Chittister writes, "The practice of *statio* is meant to center us and make us conscious of what we're about to do and make us present to God who is present to us. *Statio* is the desire to do consciously what I might otherwise do mechanically. *Statio* is the virtue of presence. If I am present to this child before I dress her, then the dressing becomes an act of creation. If I am present to my spouse in the living room, then marriage becomes an act of divine communion. If I am present to the flower before I cut it, then life becomes precious. If I am present to the time of prayer before I pray, then prayer becomes the juncture of the human with the Divine."<sup>2</sup>

Once we are refreshed with God's presence, we leave this holy space to offer back to God the love God has given us by spreading it like mystical seeds of God's love. The love we are filled with is not for us, but for a world in deep pain and turmoil. Ironically, God's love becomes most effective in us as we give it away. The love that Jesus is calling forth from us is not emotion; it is not affection, admiration or acceptance, though those emotions may be present. Warm feelings, especially of gratitude, often fill our hearts as we consider all that God has done for us and emotional responses are not inappropriate. They are simply not what Jesus is talking about. The primary component of biblical love is not affection but commitment—stubborn, unwavering commitment. Similarly, to love our neighbor, including our enemies, does not mean that we must feel affection or admiration for them. To love our neighbor is to imitate God by taking their lives seriously.

Amy Levine retells the story of Rebbe Moshe Leib of Sassov, who announced to his disciples, "I have learned how we must truly love our neighbor from a

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<sup>2</sup> Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled From the Daily*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991

conversation between two villagers which I overheard. The first said: 'Tell me, my friend, do you love me?' The second person answered: 'I love you deeply.' 'Do you know,' said the first, 'what gives me pain?' 'How can I know what gives you pain?' said the second. 'If you do not know what gives me pain,' said the first person, 'how can you say that you truly love me?' Understand, then," continued the rabbi, "to love, truly to love, means to know what brings pain to your comrade."<sup>3</sup>

When we leave this holy space to re-enter "the crowded ways of life,"<sup>4</sup> I invite you to adopt *some* practice of *statio* to re-center yourself any transitional time or place, including those periods that you have not chosen – waiting in traffic, waiting for your morning latte, waiting at the doctor's office, before meetings, on-hold, walking to your car, riding the bus or any other situation that you might otherwise experience as wasted time or inconvenient delays. By choosing to experience these as invitations to re-connect with the gift of life, you can gradually become more aware of God's "always and already" presence in every circumstance. Once reconnected with the love of God, you will find yourself increasingly prepared to enter the holy space of other people's perspectives and pains, to take their lives seriously, seeking and serving God in all.

Come, then, to this table to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. And then go from this holy place filled with Christ to practice loving your neighbor as God loves you.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Amy Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> From the first line of our closing hymn, #609: "Where cross the crowded ways of life, where sound the cries of race and clan, above the noise of selfish strife, we hear thy voice O Son of Man."