

**October 23, 2011**

**Pentecost XX**

**Richard Holmer**

First Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

Second Reading: I Thessalonians 2:1-8

Gospel: Matthew 22:34-46

### **What Works for You?**

In our current secular culture, the Great Commandment seems to be: “Do Whatever Works For You.” These days there is a great deal of disenchantment with social institutions—including the church. Many are suspicious of the values long associated with these institutions. People have grown weary of all the hypocrisy: leaders who say one thing and do another.

In the absence of trusted, objective standards, the basis for decision-making becomes more and more subjective. Each individual chooses for himself/herself the best course to follow. The one absolute rule is that no one should ever judge what someone else chooses.

So, if the first and great commandment is, “Do Whatever Works For You,” the second is like unto it: “Never judge what works for someone else.”

In other words, absolute tolerance becomes the order of the day—and so, in effect, “anything goes.” A person may not like or agree with the choices made by someone else, but they have no actual basis for criticizing it. It may not work for you, but it works for them. One may think all motorcycle riders should be required to wear helmets—others may want the freedom to go without. One may think it is always wrong to cheat on a test—another may think it’s OK now and then. One may think husbands and wives should always be faithful to one another—another may think that’s unrealistic. One may think it’s our duty to help the poor and needy—another may think they should help themselves.

The important thing is that no one imposes their values and beliefs on anyone else. Each person needs to figure out what works for them and stick with that. If it’s right for you—then it’s all right. The sovereign individual is the arbiter and measure of all things. You decide what’s right, and the only one you need to answer to is yourself.

Another way to summarize this ethic is: “Love yourself and live for yourself.” The writer Ayn Rand embraced this approach. She said, “I swear by my life and by my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.” Rand published a book titled, “The Virtue of Selfishness,” which pretty much says it all about where she’s coming from. Rand once said, “Why should you care what people will say? All you have to do is please yourself.”

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The fact is most of our lives are influenced at least to some extent by this notion of “doing whatever works for you.” We might want to add the caveat, “as long as you don’t hurt anyone.” But we don’t need much encouragement to pursue self interest. Self interest is our primary ethic as good consumers: “Get what you want;” “Have it your way.” Whether it’s ordering off the menu in a restaurant or shopping for a car, the guiding principle is the same: “whatever works for you.”

So, you can imagine that when some Pharisees approached Jesus and asked him, “Teacher, which commandment is the greatest?” that he might possibly have replied:

“Do what ever works for you.”?

Hardly.

Why is this? Is it because Jesus doesn't really care about our personal wants and wishes? Is it because it doesn't matter to Jesus if people get much out of life, if they ever experience joy? Is it because Jesus only cares about getting people to do what he tells them to do?

Not at all.

Jesus said that his purpose in coming is that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Jesus simply has a different notion about what it takes to live abundantly.

Jesus knows the way to abundant life doesn't begin with you or me—it starts with God. Our natural instinct is to begin with ourselves. Who do we spend more time with, after all? Who better knows our wants and needs? Who has to live with the consequences of all our decisions? Who could possibly care about us more than we do?

Jesus says: Get over yourselves and begin with God. God actually knows our wants and needs better than we do; he made us. God cares for us more than we could ever hope to deserve.

So Jesus says the greatest and first commandment is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

We need to begin by looking outward, beyond ourselves, rather than by looking inward: to look to the Cause instead of the Effects, to look to the Source of life itself.

Jesus assures us:

Ask and you will receive.

Seek and you will find.

Knock and the door will be opened to you.

We begin by reaching out to God—reaching out in love. To love God is to love Goodness, to love Truth, to love Beauty, to love Life. To know God is to love God—for God is love. Likewise, the way to know God is through loving God. To love God is to give God our time and attention, which is another way to say, our prayer.

By prayer I mean not only with hands folded, eyes closed, offering up petitions, but prayer as practicing the presence of God. When St. Paul says, “Pray constantly,” he's urging us to keep God always in mind—to do everything unto the Lord.

Loving God with all our heart, soul and mind is giving God our very best. And so magnificent cathedrals, and churches like ours, are dedicated to the glory of God. Great works of art and music are created as offerings to God. Bach wrote on the last page of his many glorious compositions: Soli Deo Gloria, to God be the glory.

We are not all artists, but it was Martin Luther's great insight that we show our love for God by doing whatever work we do to the glory of God. In his doctrine of vocation, Luther assures us that the scullery maid can honor God as much as any bishop or artist by doing her job well.

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Jesus teaches us that we also love God by loving one another. The second commandment, which is like unto the first, is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Here again, we are drawn out of ourselves, and looking beyond ourselves to find meaning and value.

Why do we encourage people to volunteer:  
to help at AJ Katzenmaier?  
to build house with Habitat?  
to support LSSI?

to give generously to COOL?  
to bring food for PADS?

Because Jesus tells us that as we do for others, we are doing also for him. To serve our neighbor is to serve God.

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And remember: the message is love your neighbor as you love yourself. The Gospel message is not: “Forget yourself.” “You don’t matter.” “Don’t love yourself.” The Good News is that there is more to life than loving only yourself. That when we open our hearts to God and to other people, our lives become far richer than they could ever be alone. This is the message of our Stewardship Theme:

**J**esus  
**O**thers  
**Y**ou

Joy comes when we get our priorities straight.

Now, it’s easy to stand here and say that the way to a joyful life is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. But we all know how hard it can be to do what Jesus asks. Week after week we openly confess the truth: “we have not loved you with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.”

Somehow we keep wanting to love ourselves first, and then later get around to loving God and other people. The great leap of faith is to trust that by loving God and others, bit by bit we become the kind of persons who are actually worthy of being loved.

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To confess that we fall short is to say we believe there is a better way—and that is the way we aim to go: To Go for the Joy of loving God and Others.

To live only for ourselves is a dead end.

I’ve told you before about the cartoon from the New Yorker I keep on my desktop. It shows the devil welcoming a group of new arrivals to hell. He says to them, “You’ll find there is no right or wrong here—just whatever works for you.”

Amen.