

"Becoming Saints"
Sermon for All Saints Sunday
Lectionary Year B
November 1, 2009
Text: Mark 12:28-34
Dr. David T. Howeth

The scribe who came to see Jesus apparently was quite impressed with the way he had answered the questions asked of him previously by the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees, questions that were insincere at best and lethal at worst and which all were posed for the same reason, to try and trap Jesus. But this scribe, a serious student of scripture, came with a genuine question about the priority of the commandments, a sincere question with no hidden agenda, about which commandment is greatest.

Jesus' response to the scribe's question was to quote two Old Testament passages. The first, called the "Shema," is from Deuteronomy 6:4. It is called the Shema because the Hebrew word for hear is *shema*, and the commandment begins with, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone." The crowd would have been right with Jesus after he offered the first part of his response. Originally the Shema was directed against pagan polytheism, the belief in many gods. Israel's religion was monotheistic, a belief in only one

God. Jesus' hearers, then, could affirm that their belief was in one God who was to be the object of their total and complete devotion.

But Jesus did not stop with the Shema. He had a way of pressing on, of pushing the envelope a little. He probably took the crowd in a new direction by adding the second commandment and putting it on a plane with the first. The second commandment, the one about loving the neighbor as oneself, comes from Leviticus 19:18. His hearers would have known both these commandments well. They were not new in and of themselves. What was different was the linking together of the two in a way that makes them inseparable. That is what makes Jesus' response to the scribe's question radical.

Schubert Ogden, my theology professor in seminary, explains how these commandments fit together. He suggests that these two commandments, to love God with all our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves, imply that the only conditions under which we can obey both of the commandments are conditions that would require ourselves and our neighbors to be within God, not alongside God or in addition to God. Ourselves and our neighbors have to be seen as being within God, because if we are to love God with *all* our being, every bit of being we have, we don't have any being left over with which to love something other than God. Therefore, obeying the second commandment, loving

the neighbor as ourselves, must be a way of loving God, otherwise we could not obey the first commandment.

There is another way of looking at it. We don't love God with all we are and then decide whether or not to love ourselves and our neighbors. We don't do one and then the other. We simply don't have that option. *We must do both at the same time.* The only way we can do both at the same time, then, is to love God *through* the loving of ourselves and our neighbors.

We cannot separate these two commandments. If we try to love God without loving ourselves and our neighbors, we really are not loving God. If we try to love ourselves and our neighbors without loving God, we really are not loving ourselves and our neighbors as we should, since *our* understanding of love has to be transformed into *God's* way of loving if it is to be authentic.

Please notice carefully how this loving process takes place in practice. We love God *as* we love ourselves. This is not narcissism or self-worship. It is claiming God's love for us and living out of that love. It is healthy self-esteem; it is vital security of identity; it is self-acceptance; it is claiming authentic personhood; it is self-love. We cannot love God if we don't love ourselves, and we can't love others if we don't have a healthy self-love. If we fail to love ourselves as we should, we let our insecurity, our lack of self-esteem, and our identity

problems poison our relationships by being self-centered and self-absorbed. We must love ourselves as God loves us.

Once we have developed a responsible and mature self-love, we are free to love others as ourselves. And we are to love *all* others this way, not just the others who are just like us and not just the people who are easy to love. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan immediately after this teaching on the greatest commandment in order to demonstrate the fact that the next person we meet is our neighbor. The neighbor even can be someone we hate. We claim God's love for ourselves, but we don't try to hoard or hang onto that love. We give it away. We let it flow through us to all the persons we touch in our daily living.

It is this process by which we love God with all our being. We claim and appropriate God's love for ourselves and then pass it on to others. This is what it means to follow these two great commandments. This is what it means to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

One of the many characteristics of the saints of the church is that they are stable. They are characterized by a certain stability in their lives. Where does that stability come from? I want to suggest that it comes from following these two great commandments as I have described them.

Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse, who used to teach at Perkins, once said that love of *God*, love of ourselves, and love of the neighbor, are like the legs of a three-legged stool. You are familiar with this particular kind of stool. What is true about it? If the legs are not of the same length, if any of the three legs is shorter or longer than the other two, the stool will not be as stable. It will tilt, perhaps a little or maybe a lot, depending on the degree to which the legs are uneven.

Such is true in our lives if we don't have these three aspects of our faith in equal measure. If we love *God* too little, or love ourselves too little or too much, or fail to love our neighbor as much as we do *God* and ourselves, our lives will be as unsteady to stand on as a three-legged stool with uneven legs. We, too, will tilt. Our lives will be out of balance. We won't be stable.

I believe each of us has the capacity to become a saint of the church. The truth is that *God* already counts us as saints and simply asks us to live up to that status. Let me repeat that: *God already counts us as saints and simply asks us to live up to that status. We become the saints we are* by living, day in and day out, stable and steady lives. And we do that by loving *God* with all our being and our neighbors as ourselves. We are becoming saints to the extent to which we choose to live in this way.