

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

24th Sunday After Pentecost: Proper 26 – Year B

RCL Readings¹ – Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Psalm 119:1-8; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

ACNA Readings – Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Psalm 119:1-16; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34

Seasonal Introduction. The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). However, throughout the year there are also smaller feasts. The 1st of November is All Saints' Day. God surrounded us with a great cloud of witnesses who have preceded us, many who willingly gave their lives because they looked to Jesus. We can pray that God would give us the grace to follow His blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we too may come to those ineffable joys He prepared for those who truly love Him.

Common Theme. Many things come out through our lips: prayers, praises, conversations, and blessings. Many other things also come out through our lips: complaints, demands, profanity, and curses. Hopefully most of what we say is actually good, beneficial, and encouraging. The most important thing we might ever say in our lives is the oath of loyalty to God and our declaration of faith that Jesus is Lord. Having made those declarations we mustn't live in opposition to our statement of loyalty and devotion, profaning the name of the LORD through our actions.

Hebraic Context. During prayer, a Jewish man will often bind phylacteries, or leather straps, around their hands and arms and place a small leather box on their foreheads. Together, these articles are called *tefillin*.² There is no direct commandment to wear *tefillin*, however, four verses speak of the practice, "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."³ A sign and memorial should be something you can physically interact with and the *tefillin* was the tradition that developed from interpreting these verses literally.

Tefillin were worn by Jewish males at the time of Jesus and there is every reason to suggest that Jesus would have used these signs and memorials during His own weekly prayers. Jesus did have some issues with the intention of the hearts of some who boasted about their piety by showing off their phylacteries but Jesus challenged their hypocrisy and pride, not the practical methods used to remember God's commandments—He condemned their disobedience in the very loyalty they professed to have by wearing the *tefillin*. Prayer can be very communal as well as deeply personal but we are to pray earnestly—with honesty and humility.

¹ Alternate RCL Readings: Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

² *Tefillin* is not a Hebrew word, although it is closely related to the Hebrew word for prayer (*tefilah*). It seems most likely to be from an Aramaic derivation of prayer but other theories about its origin exist. *Tefillin* have the four Biblical passages (Exodus 13:1-10; Exodus 13:11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Deuteronomy 11:13-21) that describe the practice inscribed on parchment and placed within the container. Early *tefillin* came in various shapes and colours but today most are small black leather boxes.

³ Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:8, 11:18.

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Religious articles of any kind, be they clothing or apparel such as tefillin or tzitzit serve as physical reminders of the kingship of God, His redemption and salvation, and our response in obedience to our King. Different traditions could have developed on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:8 but the physical action of wearing something can have a link to spiritual obedience. With the right intention of the heart, they serve as reminders and motivators to love and worship the Lord, with the community of God—both past, present, and future.⁴

Deuteronomy 6:1-9. Moses, with his final chance to speak to Israel, reminded Israel of all that God had done for them and what God expected before they entered the promised land. It wasn't just Moses creating a code of law, such as the Code of Hammurabi, but God. And it wasn't just for the Israelites that Moses had guided through the wilderness but also for their descendants. The people were to know the laws of God and, in knowing them, fear God and, in fearing God, obey God and, in obeying God, there would be great blessings.

Deuteronomy 6:5 is the greatest commandment in Scripture.⁵ And the *Sh'ma*,⁶ as Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is called, is a commandment.⁷ Not only is "You shall love..." a command but the term for

⁴ The Jewish sages also believed that when the *tefillin* are worn that Israel declares that they are the people of God, for the name of God resides on them (*Berakhot* 6a.19-20). This is not an endeavour to be taken lightly as the nations will see if the name of the LORD is worn in vain. Through obedience in wearing the signs of the *tefillin*, Jewish men connect with their history and are also redeemed as God redeemed His people in Egypt and the wilderness. The sages also stated that God Himself wore *tefillin* and that in wearing the *tefillin* we should be drawn to humility and the fear of God (*Berakhot* 6a.17-18; *Mishnah Torah: Tefillin and Mezuzah and the Torah Scroll* 4.25).

⁵ While some Christians may think of the Ten Commandments as the centre of the Hebrew Bible, it doesn't contain the greatest commandment in the Scriptures. They are important, but God didn't bring Israel out of Egypt to give them Ten Commandments. "And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them." He redeemed and delivered them in order to dwell in their midst and be their God as they would be His people.

The *Sh'ma*, Deuteronomy 6:4-5, is declared twice daily in Jewish tradition in accordance with the statement to teach them "...when you lie down, and when you rise." And Jesus, in Mark 12:28-34, outright declared that the command in the *Sh'ma* was the most important commandment. We are to love the LORD for He loved us. "It is because the LORD loves you... that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you..."

⁶ *Sh'ma* in Hebrew is the word for "Listen" or "Hear". Liturgically, the Jewish people often simply take the first significant word of a text as the title for that entire text. And so Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel..." became the title for the entire text of not only Deuteronomy 6:4-9 but also the entirety of Deuteronomy 6-11 with Deuteronomy 6:1-3 and Deuteronomy 11:22-32 being the preamble and closing statement of the *Sh'ma* and Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Deuteronomy 11:13-21 being the bookends.

⁷ Not only is, "You shall love" a command but the term for "hear" in Hebrew is also commonly used to mean "obey" as well.

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“hear” in Hebrew is also commonly used to mean “obey” as well. We are commanded to love, and so love is a choice that we are to make.⁸

In order to make the correct choice, Moses urged the Israelites to write the Torah on their hearts.⁹ How? By teaching it to their children. Faithful obedience is primarily to be taught in the family. Moses would no longer be there for the Israelites and, while Levites and priests were to also teach, Moses commanded the Israelites to teach their own children. Faithfulness is the best way to teach the fear of God to our children, living out our lives in obedience to God—not just in hearing but in doing. And it can't be hypocritical. When we wake up, when we go to bed, when we are working, and in our leisure we hear and obey—in all this our family can see whether we truly fear God (something a Levite, no matter how faithful, could teach someone else's child).

But the *Sh'ma* isn't only a command, it is also considered to be an oath of loyalty. When the Jewish people recite the *Sh'ma* each evening and morning, they announce to themselves, their family, and even the principalities and powers that God is their King. As King, they are subject to His rule and must keep His statutes and His commandments. As King, if they are disobedient or rebellious they are still subject to His judgments and even His anger. As King, God could have asked for countless things, but He asked for our love. Nonetheless, love is not a matter left to impulse or feelings, nor is it intangible. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

Psalm 119:1-8.^{10 11} While God is not words in a text, we must be careful to not forget that the word of God is just that, His words, His commandments, His decrees—the things He wants us to know and follow. The Lord should not be removed or separated from His word. The psalmist had a high appreciation for the Scriptures. Psalm 119 refers to the Scriptures so many times that almost every verse makes mention of the Torah, the commandments, or the Word of the Lord. In some form or another, the Scriptures are mentioned in 171 of the 176 verses. Throughout Psalm 119 the laws of God and His commandments are seen as very positive and not a burden or heavy weight.¹²

⁸ Jesus added that “Love your neighbour” is the second greatest commandment (see Mark 12:28-34). Because these are choices that we can either obey or disobey, it makes sense that we could even love our enemies—not through emotion alone but through the choices we make.

⁹ Jeremiah 31:31-34 wasn't a new concept. God's people have always supposed to keep His words on our hearts.

¹⁰ ACNA includes Psalm 119:9-16

¹¹ Psalm 119 has an unknown author but is the longest Psalm and has the form of an abecedarian acrostic poem. Psalm 119:1-8 starts with the first Hebrew letter, *Aleph* while Psalm 119:9-16 starts with the second Hebrew letter, *Bet*.

¹² This positive view of the laws and guidance of God can, unfortunately, be quite challenging for many Christians. Love and grace are so often thought to be opposed by obedience and law. But Moses wrote that the commandments of God were “not too hard for you, neither is it far off” and immediately followed that up by talking of obedience in the context of loving the LORD God. Jesus declared that, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And I John 5:2-3 states, “By this we know that we love the

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While Psalm 119 has several themes, the consistent theme is one of devotion and loyalty to God and His instructions. Loyalty to God is characterized by the phrase, to “walk in His ways”.¹³ This idea can be seen in the word *halacha*, the walking out of our faith.¹⁴ Faith should always be practical and practiced and is a natural extension of belief. And the only way for us to walk blamelessly is to follow the law of the LORD.

If God actually spoke the words of Torah, His instructions and guidance, then Torah is good and Holy.¹⁵ Logically, and Biblically, if we believe that then we should follow His instructions—to do otherwise would be a deliberate act of disobedience and disloyalty. But again, this isn't a terrible thing that we must do. We can only be blessed if we walk in His ways, for we will be loyal to God and show our love for Him and we already know that God loves us.

There are other ways to walk, for instance, our own ways. But if we want to be steadfast and pure, we must try to align our ways with the ways of the Lord. Nonetheless, we aren't only acting because we must. We should delight in following God and we do so with all our heart. It is from the heart that the desire to obey the lord is brought forth. This can help us distinguish obedience from works righteousness. Obedience flows out of love and gratitude towards God and brings blessing. If we are simply working to acquire righteousness, it is usually a form of self-righteousness and often stems from a misunderstanding of the role of the Torah—it also often chooses not to obey God in all His commandments but rather the ones that we think are important or show off our own righteousness.

Hebrews 9:11-14. The author of Hebrews often refers to Jesus as being greater than something else: Angels, Moses, Joshua, Aaron and the High Priests. This shouldn't come as a surprise as Jesus was called “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and He upholds the universe by the word of His power.” But the author of Hebrews also continuously used a Jewish exegetical technique known as *kal v'homer*.¹⁶

children of God, when we love God and obey His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.”

¹³ See also Deuteronomy 30:11-16

¹⁴ Paul used this language many times throughout his letters. “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...”

¹⁵ Romans 7:12 states this outright, “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”

¹⁶ Hillel provided 7 exegetical methods to study Scripture in the first century BCE (additional Hebraic exegetical methods were added over the following centuries). The most basic of the exegetical methods was *kal v'homer*, from the lighter to the heavier (the heavier to the lighter was also occasionally used). This is where you draw a conclusion from a minor premise to a major one. It means that what applies in a less important case will certainly apply in a more important one. The phrase has come to mean an inescapable conclusion. A simple example is: if David is stronger than Solomon and Solomon can lift 50kgs then David can also lift 50kgs and should be able to lift even more—*kal v'homer* should be very

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Using this exegetical principle as applied to the blood of sacrifices, if standard sacrifices sufficed for the purification of the flesh in the Tabernacle made by man, how much more would the blood of the Messiah purify not just the flesh, but also our souls and consciences. With this method of study, the author didn't nullify the importance of the standard sacrifices in an earthly temple (in fact, if they were utterly unimportant than they could not be used as a case study for the more important case) but declared that if sacrifices were good and useful (they were, after all, commanded by God) then the blood of Jesus was even greater.

What are the dead works that need to be purified? It is sin.¹⁷ Sin inhibits our true worship of the living God but the loving act of Jesus' sacrifice can bring us to a place that we can serve the living God. And Jesus will continue to mediate for us, not just once at the cross but continually.

Mark 12:28-34. Jesus, upon arriving in Jerusalem, immediately joined in two of the favorite pastimes of the Jewish people in Israel: condemning the practices of the Temple leadership and discussing the Bible in great detail. A Sadducee (likely part of the Temple leadership) came to Jesus and asked Him about the resurrection.¹⁸ Jesus' authoritative and powerful answer

logical and straightforward. In the New Testament an example would be in the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 7:9-11 where He says, "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" This phrase, "How much more" usually indicates that the exegetical technique of *kal v'homer* was being employed.

¹⁷ Some commentators have been tempted to declare that dead works are works we do in obedience to the commandments of the Old Testament. Theodore, a friend to John Chrysostom, seems to have implied that dead works included the rituals and sacrifices of the Old Testament. However, even John Chrysostom, who was so often anti-semitic, understood it to be sin (*Homilies on the Epistles to the Hebrews*, 15.6) along with many of the early church fathers. In Hebrews 6:1, the same phrase is used in relation to distinguishing between good and evil.

¹⁸ The Sadducees and Pharisees had long been arguing about the resurrection as they utterly disagreed over this important doctrine. The Sadducee who approached Jesus probably thought he was quite clever with his argument, possibly having presented the argument to other Pharisees before Jesus to stump their argument about the resurrection and the world-to-come.

Resurrection was a common doctrine of discussion in the 2nd Temple period. Though the Scriptures did not speak much on the topic, there were occasional glimpses of the possibility of a resurrection (Gen 5:24; Num 16:33; 1 Sam 2:6; 28:8–19; 2 Kgs 2:11; Isa 26:19; Ezek 37:1–14; Prov 12:28) and Daniel 12:1-3 is even explicit about the resurrection. However, the *Midrash Tanchuma, Bereshit* 5.3 states that "the Sadducees denied the existence of the hereafter, saying: 'As the cloud is consumed and vanisheth away, so he that goeth down to the grave shall come up no more (Job 7:9).'"

By the time of II Maccabees, the resurrection wasn't only a theoretical doctrine but was a strong enough belief for many Jewish followers of God to willingly die, believing He would raise them in the world-to-come. The exact form of resurrection was still debated, whether between Pharisees or Essenes

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attracted others to also discuss the Bible with Him. One scribe in particular came to Jesus with a common, but important question.

There are 613 laws in the Torah and in the Second Temple period there was debate as to whether all the commandments were of equal weight or if any were greater. A popular answer in Jesus' time was that "love your neighbour" summed up the law.¹⁹ When asked the question "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus replied with the words of the *Sh'ma* recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, and strength."²⁰ But Jesus did include, "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" as being of great importance.

Jesus combined these two commandments using a common Hebraic exegetical method.²¹ Jesus didn't invent something new or unknown and yet, due to the skill of Jesus' answer, the scribe immediately recognized the truth. To love the one true God and to love our neighbour is the most important thing we can do. Of course, that isn't to say that the details on how to love God or our neighbour aren't important—to obey is better than to sacrifice, but sacrifice is still part of our obedience.

and even Sadducees (who didn't believe in the resurrection). By the time *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10.1 was written, they stated, "All of the Jewish people, even sinners... have a share in the World-to-Come." But there were a few exceptions, namely, "One who says: 'There is no resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah.'"

¹⁹ *Shabbat* 31a.6 tells of a gentile who came to Hillel and Shammai, two great sages of the first century, stating that he would convert to Judaism if they could teach the entire Torah while he (the gentile) stood on one foot. Shammai, a builder, pushed the man with a builder's cubit. This was insufficient teaching for the man to convert and so he went to Hillel who told him, "That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study." Later, Rabbi Akiva also said that, "Love your neighbour as yourself" was the fundamental principle of the whole Torah. But not all sages, scholars, and rabbis were in agreement. Another scholar, Ben Azzai, argued that it was about the history (genealogy) of mankind. (Jerusalem Talmud *Nedarim* 9.4.3).

²⁰ Mark 12:30 adds "mind" to "heart, soul, and strength" in the Greek, likely to help Greek audiences fully understand the command in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. In Hebraic thought, "heart" and "soul" encompassed all aspects of a person, including reasoning. For Greek audiences, however, adding "mind" clarified that devotion involved not only their emotions but also their thoughts and intentions.

²¹ Hillel provided 7 exegetical methods to study Scripture in the first century BCE (additional Hebraic exegetical methods were added over the following centuries). The one used here was called *gezerah shewa* (equal division, or similar verdicts). In the time of Jesus, *gezerah shewa* could only be used in a situation where a specific word was only used in two cases. Those two cases, often in regard to law, were compared and the precedent of the clearer context would bring together the two cases to be understood as being of similar meaning.

The word Jesus picked was *v'ahavta* (וְאָהַבְתָּ, "and you shall love"). It is only used in Leviticus 19:18, 34 and the opening and closing of the *Sh'ma* in Deuteronomy 6:5, 11:1. By using this method of exegesis, Jesus was able to reveal that loving God and loving your neighbour were the fundamental principles of the Torah and were not to be separated.

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Hebraic Perspective. We are all commanded to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength. It is usually obvious to see a connection between love and the heart in our culture, perhaps even with love and the soul, but what is the meaning of strength? How do I love God with my strength? What did strength mean to first century Jewish people? To answer this question, the Targums come in helpful.

Targums are Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. Many people in first century Israel spoke a vernacular Aramaic as well as Hebrew for everyday language and outside Israel some Jewish people would not have used Hebrew even in a familial setting. Aramaic had become popular for many Jewish people after the return from Babylon, even as Greek would be by the time the Apostles were writing letters to Jewish people around the world. In communities where Hebrew was not understood as well, directly following the reading of Torah another would translate.²²

At the time of Jesus there were several different Aramaic versions of the Scriptures. One of the most famous translations, Targum Onkelos, was written in the time of the Apostles reflecting the interpretation of Scripture in the time of Jesus. The Targum of Onkelos translated Deuteronomy 6:4-5 as, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your possessions [or property]." From this translation we understand that strength, to the hearer in the first century, meant with everything that made you wealthy. To love God with all your strength was to love Him with all your time, money, house, and possessions.

We are often quick to love God with something we have—it might be our emotions, our intellect, or our money—but rarely do we love Him with everything we have. Is our house only for us, our family, and our best friends or is it also for the widow? Are we willing to do our work each day as to the Lord, showing His faithfulness to our neighbours? And all that work we do, are we willing to show our thankfulness through giving freely back to Him? God doesn't ask us to simply sacrifice occasionally; God asks us to be obedient, faithful, and loyal to Him alone.

ACNA Readings

Hebrew 7:23-28. The Epistle of Hebrews continuously stressed the greatness and superiority of the priesthood of Jesus over that of the Levitical priesthood.²³ But, while Jesus interceded for His disciples and the people of Israel during His time on earth, He did not act as a priest beyond

²² *Megillah* 21b.1 The first recording of this taking place occurred in Nehemiah 8:1-8.

²³ This should not be taken as an implication that the Levitical priesthood, though flawed by sinful men, was a bad thing. Jesus, God incarnate, is superior as an Apostle of God to Peter or Paul even though both, along with the other Apostles, were beloved by God and commanded by God to go out and make disciples.

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that of any other Israelite while on earth.²⁴ Rather, it seems that it was after His resurrection and ascension that Jesus took the role of High Priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 7 is, essentially, a *midrash* on Psalm 110:4, “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”²⁵ This was juxtaposed with the Levites who, like everyone else, all died—for that is the end of man.²⁶ The Levitical priesthood endured constant changes, with inconsistency as some priests were better or worse than those who came before and after them.

By the time of Jesus, the Temple system had become quite corrupt. The office of the high priest was no longer a position held until death, as it should have been according to the Torah, but was bought and sold as a political role and in political games. In contrast, Jesus has an unchangeable priesthood as He endures forever. His permanent status and role as high priest makes Jesus our permanent intercessor, and He is able to save “to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him.” The redemption and salvation offered by Jesus the Messiah is as unchanging as He is.

²⁴ As a descendant of David, of the tribe of Judah, Jesus could not be a Levitical priest seeing as a requirement to be a Levitical priest was that one was a Levite.

²⁵ A midrash is a Jewish form of commentary or exegesis on a passage or verse of scripture to expand our understanding, sometimes employing word play, allegory, or stories. For instance, one of the textual interpretations the author of Hebrews used was to suggest that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham and Levi because Abraham paid tithes to him.

²⁶ *Sanhedrin* 90b.2 used Numbers 18:28 to proclaim that the resurrection of the dead was already promised in the Torah. The people were to give an offering (תרומת, *terumat*) to Aaron and his descendants. Aaron and his descendants, in return, were to eat the offerings in a “most holy place”. However, since Aaron would not enter the land of Israel to receive these offerings with his descendants then Aaron must be raised from the dead to live forever, partaking of the offerings presented.

Certainly God is the God of the living: of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (as well as Aaron). But in Luke 16:19-31, Abraham did not intercede on behalf of the living even though, while he lived on earth, he had interceded on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is possible that we will do things in the world to come as we do now—such as Jeremiah 33:18, when Levitical priests will offer burnt offerings and grain offerings forever (just as *Sanhedrin* 90b.2 hints at). Jesus, on the other hand, has already been resurrected bodily from the dead and shall live forever (even as He always has lived). He already intercedes on our behalf and does so now, when we need it most.