

Let us pray: Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom and open our hearts and minds that we may know the cry of those brothers and sisters who are hurting and hungry and dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Don't we love our mountaintop experiences? There is nothing quite like the feeling that you get when you are on the mountain, taking in the view and seeing for yourself how small and insignificant our troubles can be when viewed from on high.

That's the experience of the disciples as they travel with Jesus to the mountaintop. But in their case, they encounter an experience of a different sort as they watch as Jesus is transfigured and joined by Moses and Elijah. They are astounded by their appearance so much that Peter suggests that they build a monument to the occasion (leave it to Peter to want to build a tourist attraction –can't you see the billboards now "See Transfiguration City – where Moses and Elijah live on") – but in the process of making this suggestion, a voice out of the heavens booms out "This is my son – my chosen one – *listen to him!*"

One thing that I noticed in studying this text was the tone of exasperation that is there, almost a tone of pleading – *listen to him!*

Over 2000 years later, as so-called Christians have done more harm in the name of Christ – the plea stands out as a command – *listen to him!*

So, I ask the question, if we were to just listen to Jesus, what would we hear him say?

Well, I don't think that it takes a biblical scholar to get that Jesus' message to us is a message of love. God's love for us is the constant that we find throughout the Bible. God's love and God's disappointment in us because we just don't get it.

When Jesus was approached by the young lawyer who asked of him "Rabbi, what is the greatest commandment?" how does Jesus reply? He said "You are to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul and with all of your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as you love yourself. All of the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments."

Love God.

Love Neighbor.

*Everything* is based upon this.

All of our relationships. All of our encounters with one another are based upon these two commandments: Love God. Love Neighbor. It seems so simple when we hear it, but living it is anything but simple.

What else did Jesus say?

Well, in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John, after the last supper and just before Jesus predicts Peter's denial, Jesus says this "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Three times he tells them that

they are to love one another – you’d think that we might get it if it is repeated enough, but we don’t.

Our nature is to do anything but love one another. We like to gossip too much or find things to tear one another down rather than to build one another up.

You might even think that loving one another would be a given in the church, but sadly, the church is sometimes the last place where some would find love. In fact, there are “churches” where Jesus himself would be unwelcome if for no other reason than the folks that he associated with. But you know, I think that we can at least try to love one another – and I mean everyone, with no exceptions. It shouldn’t matter to us if someone is gay or straight, immigrant or native, Christian or Jew or Muslim or Hindu, black or white or Latino or Asian or whatever. We don’t have to accept their sins, if, in fact, someone is openly committing sin – but their sins do not give us any reason whatsoever to **not** love them.

You know, a while back at another appointment, I had put up on the sign out front “God loves you and we do too.” I let that stay up for a day or two before changing it to read “God loves you and we’re trying.” Do you know why I changed it? Truth in advertising. It’s hard to love others, especially if they are so dog gone determined to make it hard to love them.

The voice said, “This is my Son, the beloved one, *listen to him!*”

So what else, did Jesus have to say to us?

Well, when he was talking about the final judgment he said this:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

When you did it to the least of these who are members of *my family*, *you did it to me*. In this passage of scripture from the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, Jesus pretty much lays it out for us. He tells us that we are to feed the hungry, give something to drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the folks who need clothing, take care of the sick, and visit the prisoner. And when we do this, we do it to him.

About this time last year, a dear friend and I were chatting on facebook and he asked me to covenant with him to pray for the men who are currently condemned to death row. And I did. We gathered the names of the

men who are on death row in Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia and we covenanted with one another to pray for these people. And we did, for a while. But then we let other matters get in the way and our prayers for these prisoners fell by the wayside. But we have renewed that covenant as we prepare to enter the season of Lent on Wednesday... and I hope that we will stick with it for more than just a season. Why? Because every one of them is a child of God. The crimes that they have committed may have been heinous, but God loves them just the same... and the least that we can do is pray for them.

You know, I'm always impressed by the faith of someone who is the family of someone who has been brutally murdered, yet they offer forgiveness to the murderer, because it is what Jesus has commanded of us. We saw that happen following the murder of nine people worshipping at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC in June of 2015. They were murdered by a white supremacist named Dylan Roof who had hoped that he could incite a race war. At his sentencing hearing, family members offered their forgiveness for his crime against them and their family members.

We've seen forgiveness modeled this past week as the State of Tennessee was preparing to execute Nick Sutton. My friend, the Reverend Charles Maynard was one of the people calling for clemency. Charles is the nephew of one of the men that Sutton murdered. He was joined by seven former prison officers, three of whom said that Sutton had saved their lives and they were joined by five members of the jury that had sentenced him to death.

I don't know if I could do it if Charlene or Monica were to be harmed, but I would be challenged to at least try. And only with God's help would I be able to do it.

This love stuff just isn't easy is it?

This being a follower of Jesus isn't easy either.

This is my son, the beloved, *listen to him!*

Just before Jesus ascends to heaven, he gives some parting instructions to the disciples who have gathered there when he says to them "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The disciples didn't have time to rest. Jesus gave them marching orders and he expected them to carry them out. In this great commission he tells the disciples, and us, to take action. Do you hear the action words there? The words that tell us that we are to go, to make disciples, to baptize, to teach, and, most importantly, to remember. To remember that God is with us, that Jesus is with us, how long? To the end of the age.

The Beatles had a song that said, "All you need is love, love is all you need." Well, on the surface, their message is not quite complete. Because we need more than love. We need Christ. We need Christ because we

cannot do it on our own. We cannot love others with the wholly sacrificial love of Christ living within us.

With Christ, through Christ and in Christ we have all we need when we actively live our lives in a way that shows our love of God and our love of neighbor. To do that, we need to allow the light of Christ to shine in us and through us.

We need to understand that it is not about us. It is not about our comfort. It is not about us wanting a church that is like what we remember, what we are fond of, or like what we have always known. The church is not ours at all. It is the church of Jesus Christ and if it doesn't include the folks that we would rather not even be around, then it's just a social club for our benefit... not the church upon which the gates of hell will not prevail.

This is my Son, the beloved, *listen to him!*

After nearly 2000 years, don't you think that maybe it's time that we started?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.