

Proper 25A
Jesus and the Shema

Stewardship is about love.

It's not about meeting a budget, maintaining a building, or even paying a priest.

It's not about duty, or dues, or guilt, getting a committee off your back, supporting your pet project, or showing your discontent with the vestry.

Stewardship is not about keeping the church going because she's a noble old gal who's always been there - a bit irrelevant, but noble. It's not about the pledge drive, or the diocese, or belonging or money.

Stewardship is about love, because the Church is the steward, the manager, mediator, the broker, the trustee, of God's love for this world.

Her only reason for being, is to bring the world to God's heart, and to bring God's heart to the world. It's really just that simple.

Not easy, of course, because she has to figure out how best and most faithfully to do that. She may or may not need a building for it, but if she does - if a building helps the Church to more faithfully bring the world to God's heart and God's heart to the world, then a building she should have, and it must be safe, and warm, and well-lit, and say to all who enter it, "You are expected, wanted, and welcome."

She may or may not need an organ and piano, and a musician to play them, but if she does - if music helps the Church to more faithfully bring the world to God's heart and God's heart to the world, then she should have a musician with spirit, who doesn't just pound out songs on the keys, but who uses his talent to make hearts sing.

She may or may not need clergy, but if she does - if an ordained member or two helps the Church to more faithfully bring the world to God's heart and God's heart to the world, then she should have deacons and priests who love their people, and who strengthen them for their *own ministries*.

She may or may not need...No, wait, she definitely needs children and youth. Not to take up her mantel so she'll survive into the future, but as conduits of spirit. And because only children can show her that heaven is in her midst.

The Church must have children in order to bring the world to God's heart and bring God's heart to the world. And those children must have some grown-ups who take them seriously enough to be with them each week *in that distant part of the building to which they've been banished* because their exuberant, wide-open presence in worship makes the rest of us squirm.

Stewardship all boils down to love. Just like Moses' Law, as we read in the gospel today, all boils down to love.

Now, remember where we are. The Saducees and the Pharisees have been stepping up their frantic attempts to trap Jesus, or defuse him, asking impossible questions (*Rabbi, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?*) or stupid ones (*Rabbi, if a woman, seven times over, marries the brother of her most recently deceased husband, whose wife will she be in the resurrection?*)

It's Passover, in Jerusalem, and mobs of people are thinking that this dangerous nut, Jesus, just might be their long-awaited messiah. And if their leaders don't calm things, the Romans will sweep down on the city and crush them all.

He's got to be stopped!

So they send in their big-gun, a lawyer, with a real question, a hard and serious one:

Rabbi, which commandment of the law is the greatest?

Give us a summary, a "Cliffs Notes" version of that voluminous law with its 613 rules! Well, you'd need one, right, or you'd never have the courage to get out of bed.

It had been done before. David had summarized the whole law in just 11 rules. Isaiah in six, Micah in three, and Amos with only one: Seek God and live.

The great Rabbi Hillel, long before Jesus, when challenged to recite the whole Torah while standing on one foot said, "*What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole law. The rest is commentary.*"

Jesus knew all this, of course, and how others before him had even said it how he was about to -

*Shema Yisrael Yahweh Eloheynu Yahweh Echad
Baruch Shem K'vod Malchuto L'olam Va'ed*

"Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and strength."

So that's what he said, too. I mean, how can you improve on that? And all this guy had asked for was one commandment, the greatest one, so Jesus could have stopped there.

But then he took this little line from Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," and glued those two laws together forever, into one new one that says, "You can't really love God without loving your neighbor, and to love your neighbor is to love the God in whose image every neighbor is made."

And on these two things, says Jesus, everything else depends. On these two simple (but *not easy*) things, love God, love every neighbor - hangs the life of the world and all that is in it.

Everything else is just commentary.

We might wish we could pry these apart, you know, just love God, and not be bothered with all those troublesome, disappointing, achingly fallible, intractably human others, but then we'd only be loving the *idea* of God, the lofty notion of God, and not God himself, who, in fact, wears the skin of every neighbor.

So Jesus stuck them forever together, love of God and love of neighbor, and guess what. We are the glue that keeps them that way. The church is the glue that holds the world to God's heart and applies God's love to its wounds.

The Church is the steward of God's love.

Which is why I can say with all confidence, and no attempt to be clever, that stewardship is about love.

I won't say it can't happen – that *without the prayer of the Church God won't know the world's sorrow and need*, and that, *without the ministry of the Church, the world won't know God's love* – but I will say that's who we are and that's why we're here, as managers, mediators, trustees, as stewards of God's love for this love-starved world, and if we're not being that, we're not being the Church. A club maybe, a nice bunch of well-meaning folks in a lovely place we call "church". But we *are* church only when we steward God's mad love so it can wildly move through us.

Stewardship is about love.

So, during the upcoming pledge drive, when you're asked to promise some bit of your treasure to the life of this parish, *please* don't ask yourself, "What can I afford?" (unless you reframe the question to be, "What can I afford to hold back and still keep my heart open, supple, and warm?").

And don't ask yourself, "What do I need to pay in order to keep our church going or help it keep paying a priest?"

Those may be relevant questions for later, but they're not the right questions to start with, the questions worthy of your heart.

Ask yourself first just this:

How can I best turn my time, my talents, and my treasure, meager though they may be, into great love?

If you aren't giving of what you have in the measure that stretches your own heart in love, and extends the reach of our church in love, you're missing out and so is our church. Giving is about stretching and opening the heart. If you will give the amount that does that for you, our church will be fine, I promise you.

Because stewardship is really all about love, and love is the one great, satisfying, joyful adventure of which you, and we, are worthy.

Martin Buber, a philosopher of the last century, said,

"The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable through the embracing of its beings."

We could write a million ethical codes, and volumes of books on theology and law, delving the mysteries of God, legislating morality in all behavior, trying to understand the world and our place in it.

Or we could just embrace it, for the sake of the God who adores it.

Ask yourself, in the weeks ahead,

"What do I need to give, so that my church, for God's sake, can wrap its arms in embrace around this whole beloved world?"

Amen.