

**Sermon for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost,
Proper 25, Year A**

Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

“May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Many of you know that one of my five brothers is Korean. His name is Tae, and he became a part of our family in 1953, when my father returned home from a tour of duty in Korea, which at that time, was a war zone. Tae had been orphaned at age three, when his mother died of yellow fever and his father, a soldier, was killed in combat, leaving Tae to fend for himself. Our family became Tae’s adopted family when he was four, and I think it was because of Tae and the person he was even then that each of us 10 siblings grew up truly believing that skin color has nothing to do with the worth of any human being.

When Tae graduated from high school, he decided to give back to the country that had taken him in. He joined the Army and served for 20 years, including two tours in Vietnam. He was awarded two Purple Hearts. During his final years in the Army, he served as a paralegal in the JAG Corps—the justice branch of the military—and discovered that one of his God-given gifts was his ability to resolve conflicts before they escalated to

the point where lawyers and judges need to be involved. The Army recognized his talents and utilized Tae as a mediator in the final few years of his military career. Not surprisingly, when Tae retired from the Army, he was hired by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and during his ten years there, he went to law school at night, and became an attorney when he was 56. Given his passion for a world in which justice is applied equally to all, the only cases he takes on are those involving discrimination.

You might be asking by now, why is Keehna telling us about Tae? Well, here's my point. Whenever I read a story that has a lawyer in it, I always think about Tae, because, for me, he's the gold standard of what a lawyer should be. Tae stands in stark contrast to the lawyer we see in today's Gospel, whose motivation is not to dialogue with Jesus, but to trick Jesus into saying something that can be used against him.

This is the second Sunday in a row where Matthew tells us about a group of Pharisees playing word games with nefarious intent. If you remember, last week's Gospel was about paying taxes to Caesar—and, happily, it ends with a score of Jesus: 1, Pharisees: 0. This week we have another group of Pharisees, this time including a lawyer, posing a different question, but with the same aim: to create a “gotcha” situation where, no matter how Jesus answers, his words will prove that he's a threat to the religious establishment.

It might be helpful to know a little bit about the Pharisees, since they are the ones trying to put Jesus on the hot seat again today. They were a small but influential sect that existed within Judaism before, during, and a

little bit after the time of Jesus. They numbered about 6,000 during the first century C.E. Some of their beliefs were way outside of mainstream Jewish thought; thus, they were called “Pharisees,” which, in Hebrew, means “separate ones.” What truly set them apart was their emphasis on personal, rather than communal, piety; their strict adherence to Jewish traditions and religious practices; and their literal interpretation of the Torah. They believed that all 613 commandments of Mosaic Law should be obeyed as written. Most orthodox Jews regarded the Pharisees as falsely pious, self-righteous and smug about their conviction that they were pleasing to God because they kept the Law. Jesus was among those who didn’t buy into their thinking, and he was not afraid to denounce their hypocrisy and point out to them repeatedly that human behavior and action are measured not by adherence to religious law but by God’s standard of holiness, which is justice, mercy, compassion, and purity of heart that flow from a relationship with God, not a set of intellectual beliefs about God.

So, with that little bit of background, let’s take a look at the Gospel. The question that the Pharisee lawyer asks Jesus sounds innocent enough—“Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”—but it’s really a stealth attempt to get Jesus into trouble—and it wasn’t good trouble. This is how it would work. If Jesus picked out any one of the 613 commandments in Mosaic law and said that THAT’S the greatest, it would mean that the other 612 are less important. It would set up a hierarchy, which, in the world of the Pharisees, was taboo. For them, every commandment represented the very word of God, so someone who dared to rank the commandments would be considered a heretic. That was their aim—but Jesus understood the trap they were setting. He could have ended it right there by saying

something like, “Every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord is great. Every commandment is great.” But he didn’t take that route. He chose to do something better. He turned the situation into a teaching moment for those who were watching and listening, by simply quoting a part of the Jewish confession of faith known as the Shema, which practicing Jews recite twice a day: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” You see, the Shema is not regarded by Jews as a commandment, but as the precursor of all commandments. After all, if you don’t love God, you won’t be inclined to keep ANY commandment. But if you DO love God, then everything that you think, say, and do, will flow from that. So, by quoting the Shema rather than identifying any one commandment as the greatest, Jesus outfoxed the foxes. But he didn’t stop there. He did something that no other rabbi, no other faithful Jewish person had ever dared to do: he added to the Shema by including a sentence from the holiness code of Leviticus: “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). And, even more importantly, he equated these two loves, making them the bookends between which all the commandments in Mosaic Law can be found. And, by the end of the exchange, it was the Pharisee lawyer—the one who had an intellectual grasp of the Law, but a duplicitous heart—who ended up looking foolish.

Might there be a word to describe a life that blends together, forever, love of God and love of others? I think there is. It’s the word “holy”—and it’s the life to which all of us are called. Not just some of us, but all of us. Listen again to what God asks Moses to do in the very first line of our Old Testament reading: “Speak to ALL the congregation of the people of Israel

and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

When we first hear it, it sounds like a command, but it also can be read as a promise. Listen to how the verse is paraphrased by Dr. Fred Gaiser, an Old Testament scholar and professor at Luther Seminary: "Because I am holy, you will be holy. It is my gift to you. It is who you are." To be sure, what the Israelites called a holy life in the time of Moses was quite different from what we call holiness today, but its essence has remained the same over the millenia: it's the life of God being lived through us, visible to others, and flowing out of a relationship that is so intense, so passionate, so all-encompassing, so strong and yet so tender, that God becomes the very center of our being, and the light by which we see that all of life is holy.

It's the kind of relationship that Jesus had here on earth with his Father, our Father! It fueled him, it gave him a reason to live and to love, and it imbued him with strength and courage to announce the Good News to the world that God is here, and has been with us from the very beginning, and that God's passion and longing is for a world in which agape love for one another and justice and peace will become a reality for all.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says that "God looks at us and always sees Christ, and thus finds us always and entirely lovable. God fixes [His] gaze on us because we are [His] beloved children. And one day our gaze will match God's gaze. We will find God and ourselves fully lovable in the same moment. Why? Because it is the same set of eyes that is doing the looking. All we have to do is receive God's gaze and then return what we have received. We simply complete the divine circuit, "love returning love," as St.

Francis put it.” (Excerpted from the 11/4/18 Daily Meditation on the website www.cac.org.)

“Love returning love.” How beautiful! Holiness just might be as simple as that. Amen.