

Proper 26, Year B

- When the University of Notre Dame football team left their locker room yesterday to take the field against Northwestern, the players each touched a sign hanging in the stairwell, as they have every single game since at least 1986
- If you're at all familiar with college football, or you've seen the movie Rudy, you probably know that that sign has one simple phrase on it: "Play like a champion today."
- Coaches and players at Notre Dame think, as long as they keep that slogan in the front of their mind, as long as they keep repeating that particular phrase like a mantra, if they could just keep reminding themselves to, then they'll actually be able to do it, actually be able to play like champions.
- As an Ohio State fan myself, I have to point out that I'm not telling you this because I intend to switch allegiances - but because it's an idea I've often thought about - if I could just keep something at the front of my mind all the time, how much more easily I'd be able to actually do it, actually make something a habit
- Now, when I was in seminary I had to do something called CPE - clinical pastoral education - basically chaplaincy internship in a clinical setting - mine was @ Hebrew Home - retirement community and rehab facility for predominantly (though not exclusively) Jewish residents
- And one of the things that I saw during my time there was that every room there had a *mezuzah* - a small case hanging somewhere on the doorway inside which was a scroll, and upon that scroll was inscribed a few verses from the Torah - and it began with one of the verses we just heard read this morning - "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."
 - called the Shema (from Hebrew word for 'hear'), more or less central profession of the Jewish faith - kept there to fulfill the commandment that follows to "Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." - to keep this central expression of God's identity before them at all times, in all places
- I don't want to be flippant in comparing these two things: the Shema is much more important, more deeply held, than ND's commitment to "play like a champion today"
- But if I had to guess, I'd imagine most Americans, if they were put on the spot to summarize their life philosophy, the one thing they most deeply wanted to remember at

all times, in a single phrase - they'd probably produce something more like ND's sign that like the mezuzah

- Which speaks, I think, to our Gospel passage today
- Mark tells the story of Jesus being asked which commandment is first of all, and Jesus has an answer at the ready - it is remarkable in that it's one of the few times Jesus is asked a question and gives a direct answer - doesn't answer with a parable or another question, but gives a very specific answer, and he begins with the Shema: the first commandment, he says, is 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'
- And he doesn't just give one straight answer, he even gives two! Second commandment, he says, is "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
- Two commandments, which raise two questions that I think we'd do well to keep in mind
- First is this: how much do we love God? In other words, are we loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? If we had a sign on the doorways of our house to see every time we went out into the world, to remind us, would it mention God in it? Or would it be like the sign at Notre Dame?
- There's a famous Christian quote you've probably heard - if you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?
- I've wondered this, especially over the past month or so as I've had numerous people come up to me, call me on the phone, send me mail, even come to my house, and they've been interested in one thing: asking me who I plan on voting for, or trying to convince me that I should vote for a particular candidate - I'm sure you can all probably relate
- Now compare that to the number of times over the past month that you've had someone come up to you and try to talk to you about how much God loves you, or wanted to be sure you knew how important faith is
- How much do we love God? Do we love God with our thoughts and with our words and with our actions? Is God central to everything we do?
- How much do we love God? That's the first question we should continue to ask ourselves
- The second question has to do with that second commandment - but we don't have to ask how much we love our neighbor - we're given a standard - love them as ourselves
- But the question we have to ask about this commandment is the same one a lawyer asks Jesus in Luke's Gospel - who is my neighbor?

- In response to that question in the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus doesn't give a straight answer - see what I mean? - answers in a parable - one I'm hoping you all know well - Good Samaritan
- In that parable, a man is robbed and beaten and left on the side of the road - and a couple of people, supposedly holy people, even - cross to the other side of the road to avoid that man - and then comes a Samaritan, someone who was something of an outcast comes along, and takes care of that man - and in the end, Jesus leads the lawyer to realize, the person who was a neighbor to that man was the one who allowed himself to be concerned for him - what was it that made them neighbors? Just that their paths crossed, and the Samaritan didn't ignore the other man in his need
- So who is our neighbor?
- It's no easy question to answer - and we can make it even harder if we aren't on the lookout for neighbors
- Possibly even harder today than it used to be - as the world's gotten smaller, we don't necessarily have to pass someone on a roadside for them to be our neighbor - although that isn't a bad place to start
- Our neighbors are here in Jeff City, the people we see every day and the people we make it a point not to see
- Our neighbors are friends and family across the United States and in Sierra Leone, and all the students in secondary school that the Sierra Leone association gives scholarships to
- Our neighbors are the Jewish people of this country and the world who for so long have faced higher rates of violence inspired by hate than any other group of people
- Our neighbors are the Coptic Christians of Egypt facing persecution, including those who were killed recently while on a pilgrimage to a monastery in Minya
- Our neighbors are the people of Yemen, including the 10,000 killed so far in that nation's civil war and the 50,000 civilians who've died as a result of the famine that war has caused
- Our neighbors are the people of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, a city known until recently as the murder capital of the world, people who flee their homes in search of a better life, knowing that no matter where they go, nearly anything must be better
- Our neighbors... are everywhere
- The world we live in is crying out with need - we only have to open our ears to hear the weeping or the shouting of people who need others to see them as neighbors - who need others to love them as they themselves are loved

- If we want to keep these two commandments of Jesus in front of us, at the forefront of our minds, then the one thing we cannot do is cross to the other side of the road
- So if you're able, over the course of the next week, I'd ask you to join me in thinking just as frequently as we possibly can about those two extremely important questions
- How much do I love God?
- Who is my neighbor?