

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

Jesus said, “The first 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.’

The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

There is no other commandment greater than these.”

When I was first ordained almost 25 years ago,

one of the forms I had to fill out was my CDO profile.

Church Deployment Office profile.

The CDO was trying to standardize and regularize the deployment of clergy

by using this form that was kind of like an early computer dating form.

There was a form for the clergy and a form for the churches.

Both forms would then be fed into a computer,

the wheels would turn and the lights would flash,

and a church that was looking for a new priest

would receive a list of potential candidates.

Like a lot of forms of that day and age,

short answers were entered into boxes one letter at a time.

Unquestionably the most difficult question to answer

was the one that asked you to state your personal theology

in no more than 100 characters.

Really! How in the world does one distill their personal theology

into a statement that small,

after spending three years

attempting to expand and broaden that understanding?

After much wrestling and agonizing

I finally settled on

“Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Love neighbor as self.

All else negotiable.”

After 25 years of ministry I still stand by that statement.

It is good to know that I am in good company as well.

As we heard this morning, it is Jesus’ understanding of faith,

and, as I believe I have told you on more than one occasion,

it was also Abraham Lincoln’s.

On my dark days I wonder why it isn’t everyone’s understanding,

and even more importantly,

why all the Christian churches don’t rally behind this statement.

To be fair, I don’t think any of them would renounce the statement,

it’s just that they don’t behave like they follow it.

And that brings us to point of this discussion.

Well, almost, but not quite.

First, some more context.

In the weeks and months ahead,

as COVID winds down and people begin to return to normal activities,

I am afraid that we are going to discover

that some people will have little to no interest in returning to church.

There are many reasons why, most of them out of our control.

Some of them are, I am sorry to say,

most certainly due to the bad behavior

of some folks who call themselves Christian

but don’t really behave like a follower of Jesus.

For far too long we have politely refused to make that distinction clear

because we didn’t think it was worth the effort,

or didn't want to rock the boat.

We didn't think their bad behavior would affect us.

We were wrong.

And so we now live in a culture

where most people equate Christianity with judgementalism
and see Christians as hypocrites.

As long as this situation continues people will avoid and mistrust Christians,
while at the same time

far too many Christian groups will struggle

to hang on to the power and authority they once had in society
by means that are anything but Christian.

And the situation will continue to deteriorate.

We are in an almost impossible situation.

Note, I said almost.

The good news is that we are not alone.

We are never alone.

God is here in the midst of us.

Jesus goes on before us.

The Holy Spirit broods over all we do.

So now we get to the point.

We, you and I, will need to be more obviously followers of the way of Jesus.

That means, as the old hymn goes,

they will know we are Christians by our love...

And NOT because we tell them.

Again and again we will need to be obviously out loving all those around us.

We need to be loving first.

Not because they behave.

Not because they need it.

Not because we are better than they are.

Whether they love us back
or whether they hate us back,
we love. Period.
We love them so much they begin to wonder what is wrong with us.
And most importantly we do it
not to get more people back in church,
but because our mission is to reconcile people,
all people,
to God and to each other.
Our mission is NOT to grow the church,
is not to GO to church,
but to BE the church;
the body of Christ alive and active in the world.
Once other people begin to see the difference we are making in the world,
they may want to join us in this mission.
Then and only then do we begin to talk to them about our faith,
and what it means to us,
and begin to help them discern what their faith is to them.
But that happens later in the game
after they know they can trust us to care for their faith
and to help them grow it.
Coming soon,
sometime before the holidays,
we will be having a clothing sale
with items that have Grace Episcopal Church
tastefully emblazoned on them.
We encourage you to buy some things to wear
while you are out and about town sharing the love.
We want to fly the flag a bit.

Don't worry, we are Episcopalian so, as I said, they will be tasteful!

The other thing I want you to do,

and this is the hard part really,

is to think about how you would sum up your faith.

Make it short and sweet.

It doesn't have to be only 100 characters,

but that exercise is a good way to help you get to the heart of it.

Of course you can use Jesus' summation,

but that is the easy way out.

Why have you given your life to Jesus and to his church?

Maybe you haven't quite yet and are hanging out at the edge?

That's ok.

Be honest with yourself.

When the time is right to share this with another person on the way,

you do not want to mislead.

Remember that God loves you wherever you are on the way.

You have nothing to fear.

Remember also that wherever you are on the way

you will have plenty of company.

So, there it is.

You have your homework.

Do some work to think about

how you might share why your faith is important to you,

so you can be ready to share when the time is right.

Until then,

keep helping,

keep loving,

and remember that God loves you.

Amen.