

21st Sunday after Pentecost (A) --- 26 October 2020 --- For Nebraska Synod
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 / Psalm 1 / I Thessalonians 2:1-8 / Matthew 22:34-46

Beloved: Grace to you and peace in the name of our living God --
who was and who is and who is to come again ---
and from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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I appreciate the opportunity to be with you this morning.

I'm Pastor Linda Walz, and I'm speaking to you from the chapel at Immanuel in
North Omaha.

I serve at the Trinity campus of Immanuel communities, one of the many
serving arms of the Nebraska Synod.

On my campus, we work with seniors in independent living, assisted living, and
affordable housing.

It is a privilege to serve where I do --- and to share some stewardship reflections
with you in this season of "Covidtide", as these days have been called ---
this long, drawn-out time of uncertainty, fear, transformation, and
incredible creativity on the parts of pastors and faith communities who are
learning, anew, what it means to be the people of God in the midst of
challenge.

I'm going to begin by sharing with you something that I originally posted on my
Facebook page.

It was written on an evening of extreme frustration, as we hit a roadbump at
Trinity in our own Covidtide.

Yet, I think the message speaks directly to the idea of stewardship ---
stewardship of the lives around us.

So here goes....

Pastor Linda C. Walz

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I work with a population extremely vulnerable to infectious diseases, such as Covid. Every time someone in their sphere --- closely or tangentially ---- gets infected or exposed, it is they who get locked down. They are the ones who continue to suffer for the carelessness of others.

Many of my folks haven't been out since early March. And the way things are going, an end to their imprisonment is not on their horizons.

Wear your...masks. Keep good distance between you if you must be out. Stay home!

I am heartbroken for the people I serve. They are unseen by many of you, and maybe that's part of the problem. They are the ones quarantined because you want to go to a bar or a party --- or whatever place you go that may be swimming in coronavirus.

They, too, want to be able to see their families...and go out to eat...and attend weddings and gatherings. ...Some of them are still waiting to bury loved ones; grief has been truncated and necessary rituals postponed because of Covid.

This is not about you. This is about them.

I am beyond sad for them. I am angry on their behalf. Some have settled into such deep depressions that they don't care, anymore, whether they live or die. Some want to die.

This is about them. Please, on their behalf, start to give a damn.

That was the end of my Facebook rant, but it provides an hospitable springboard for the rest of this sermon.

We are to be stewards, first and foremost, of one another.

And that's not me speaking; it is Jesus.

Our gospel this morning records an encounter between Jesus and a lawyer, who had been sent to entrap him.

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Now, there were 613 different codes in the Law of Moses.

Someone with more time than me has noted that 613 is the sum of two numbers: 365, the days in a year; and 248, which was thought to be the number of bones in the human body.

The understanding was this: The Law, given by God as a sign of the covenant, was designed to cover all of our days...and every fiber of our being.

No one law was prioritized over another, because, at its heart, the Law wasn't about behavior.

The Law was given not as a set of rules to be followed, but as the claim that YHWH laid upon Israel. It was the mark of relationship. It embodied the whole of their identity.

And it is in *that* identity that Jesus roots his answer: "You shall be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy."

The relationship that begins in God's very being is woven into us, and it is compels *all* of our human relationships.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart...and soul...and mind."

AND: (These are two sides of the same coin; two dimensions of the same holiness): "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The purpose of the Law, which Jesus came to fulfill, not obliterate! --- isn't just about "ordering" or "restricting" our behavior; it is about ordering, restructuring, recreating our entire life.

It is about centering our lives in the heart of God --- and in the relationship that God establishes with us.

All of our days. All of our being. *We are to be stewards of one another.*

When Jesus was questioned about the priority of various different laws, Jesus folds them all into one sweeping response: All of our lives are designed to reflect the one in whose image we are created.

All of our lives...all of our sensibilities and souls...are designed to reflect the life and sensibility and heart of God.

"Love God with all of one's being...and love the neighbor in the same way.

As God loves, we are called to love.

We are called to, and enlivened by, a faith that dares to equate the love of God with the *imitation* of God in our human relationships --- all of them.

With our neighbors, seen and unseen.

With our neighbors, beloved and challenging.

With our neighbors, whether enemy or friend.

Jesus calls us to the love that is "agape" --- reflective of God's self-emptying love for the whole world --- because, through it we might see manifest God's deepest longings for this creation: The well-being, the integrity, the wholeness of all that God has made. Of every single person.

THAT is stewardship --- the care, and tending to, the holy lives that surround us.

Which commandment, Jesus, is the greatest?

That question was asked as a test, but maybe Jesus answered it with an invitation:

Embrace God's love --- and embody it...

...with all of your days. With all of your being.

and, I would add in these days of Covidtime: Love looks like a masked face...and washed hands...and bodies separated by space, yet with hearts intertwined.

Amen