

LOVING

Lord of the teasing riddle, whose questions undo our certainty and set us on a different path: give us a heart of passion, a searching mind, gentle strength of body and unseen depths of soul, that we might love you wholly and our neighbors as ourselves; through Jesus Christ, the law of graces.

A Collect for Proper 25, Prayers for An Inclusive Church

THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 25A: Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18; 90:1-6, 13-14; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

OCTOBER 29, 2017

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet?"'"

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions..

In her book, *Braving the Wilderness, The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, author and social scientist Brené Brown writes:

"Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is

grounded in love and compassion.

"We seem to have forgotten that even when we're utterly alone, we're connected to one another by something greater than group membership, politics, and ideology— that we're connected by love and the human spirit. No matter how separated we are by what we think and believe, we are part of the same spiritual story."

Jesus said: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

These words of Jesus, echo from ancient scripture – from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. They also resonate with what the apostle John, John the Beloved, wrote in his letters: “This is what I mean: not our love for God but God’s love for us...” (I John 4:10) and “Anyone who says ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother or sister, is a liar, since a person who does not love their brother or sister whom they can see, cannot love God whom they have never seen.” (I John 4:30)

So scripture reveals the inextricable connection Brené Brown offers in our day. God (the “power greater than all of us”) is found at the heart of our neighbor.

While we know well this elemental, foundational, essential teaching of Jesus about love, we also know the world we live in, and we know our own imperfect selves.

Brené Brown writes: “Right now we are neither recognizing nor celebrating our inextricable connection. We are divided from others in almost every area of our lives. We’re not showing up with one another in a way that

acknowledges our connection. Cynicism and distrust have a stranglehold on our hearts. And rather than continuing to move toward a vision of shared power among people, we’re witnessing a backslide to a vision of power that is the key to the autocrat’s power over people.”

In *Braving the Wilderness*, Brown addresses the phenomenon of sorting, citing the work of author Bill Bishop in his book, *The Big Sort* in which people gather in wholly like-minded groups in feedback loops “hearing our own thoughts about what’s right and wrong bounced back to us...,” silencing dissent and growing more extreme in our thinking in the process.

Brené Brown offers four practices to address the disjunction of our lives and to regain and support our inextricable connection in love and compassion: 1. People Are Hard to Hate Close Up. Move In. 2. Speak Truth to Bullshit. Be Civil. 3. Hold Hands. With Strangers. 4. Strong Back. Soft Front. Wild Heart.

I want to look more closely at Brown’s practice: “Hold Hands. With Strangers.”

She speaks of our culture as being in spiritual crisis. I would only add that this crisis presents itself over and over again through history – as evidenced by the crisis

among Jesus and the religious leaders, as seen in today's gospel reading, as well as the occupying Romans – that brought about his death.

We find in *Braving the Wilderness*: “As hard as things are in the world right now, it's not just our polarizing culture that weakens our belief in inextricable human connection and strains our spiritual commitment to one another. It's also navigating the demands of our everyday lives. People are wonderful. And they can be hard.” Brown writes: “My favorite *Peanuts* cartoon is Linus crying ‘I love mankind... it's people I can't stand!’ Everyday life can be incredibly hard, and the people around us can push us to the very edge of our nerves and our civility.”

In reflecting further on loving the idea of humanity but experiencing people in general being on our nerves, she offers this practice of holding hands with strangers saying: “Show up for collective moments of joy and pain so we can actually bear witness to inextricable human connection.”

We need to see and touch this connection – in the way that Thomas needed to see and touch Jesus after the resurrection.

Brené Brown is a sociologist and researcher at the University of Houston, so she does exhaustive research to uncover the insights

she offers. As her research revealed this importance of showing up with others, including strangers, she wrote about her own life-long commitments: “I didn't know why I put so much value on these collective moments. Why I intentionally go to a church where I can break bread, pass the peace, and sing with people who believe differently than I do, and people who I often want to punch in the arm.”

No surprise in reading this description of going to church to know that Brené Brown is a life-long Episcopalian....

She continues: “I always knew these moments were important to me. I knew they were connected to my spiritual well-being and allowed me to stay in love with humanity while doing research that can be devastating and hard. I just didn't know why. Now I do.”

She advocates gathering in a variety of settings – like games, funerals, and concerts – and even for conversations on airplanes when we come across complete strangers.

She sums up the importance as: “... the more we're willing to seek out moments of collective joy and show up for experiences of collective pain— for real, in person, not online— the more difficult it becomes to deny our human

connection, even with people we may disagree with. Not only do moments of collective emotion remind us of what is possible between people, but they also remind us of what is true about the human spirit. We are wired for connection. But the key is that, in any given moment of it, it has to be real.”

I want to highlight one of Brené Brown’s research findings: “In the interviews with our own research participants, music emerged as one of the most powerful conveners of collective joy and pain. It’s often at the heart of spiritual gatherings, celebrations, funerals, and protest movements.”

I focus on this in particular to note that what we do in church is vastly much more than following some “tradition” – and that, obviously, we persist in engaging in music in services – including singing – in an era in which music and the arts and singing in particular is very much falling away from being a context for participation. In truth, music, offered imperfectly as only human beings can do, draws us together in a deep intimacy and as a profound expression of love of God and one

another.

Hearing these words of Jesus today, and hearing from Brené Brown and her research, we can know beyond all doubt why the greatest commandment – and the one that is like it – are critical for the life of the world now as well as for our own lives each day. Loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves have never been more essential than in these challenging days in our world.

I close with a quote from the Irish poet, philosopher, and sometime priest John O’Donohue writing about our inextricable connection in love and compassion:

“Only holiness will call people to listen now. And the work of holiness is not about perfection or niceness; it is about belonging, that sense of being in the Presence and through the quality of that belonging, the mild magnetic of implicating others in the Presence.... This is not about forging a relationship with a distant God but about the realization that we are already within God.”