

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open the bible to Deuteronomy 6.5, the source of Jesus' great commandment. Light a candle beside it.

LEADER: Our community keeps Jesus' command to love one another.

ALL: May reflecting on our lives together build bonds among us.

LEADER: We find ourselves in knowing and loving one another

ALL: May sharing who we are broaden our commitments.

As his first act in Jerusalem, Jesus cleanses the temple, claiming the space for prayer rather than commerce. "By whose authority?" temple leaders ask. The blind and lame quickly seek Jesus out and claim the space for healing.

In the gospels of the fall Sundays, Jesus inhabits the temple courts, teaching and disputing questions with the priests who serve the temple, scribes, Sadducees, elders, and Pharisees. The issues—tenants, taxes, and this Sunday, which commandment is greatest?

As citizens this fall, we dispute our own questions in the public square as we prepare to elect leaders. By whose authority shall we live? What kind of tenants shall we be on a planet home that is God's gift and the inheritance of all? Who can our taxes help?

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SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

In 2020 both the pandemic and protests have instructed us in the common good. The virus has opened our eyes to persistent racial and income inequities in our society and to how essential lower-income workers such as grocery clerks, janitors, morgue personnel, immigrants on meat processing lines are.

The social distancing that keeps the virus from spreading and overwhelming health care capacity has threatened our economy and the livelihoods of small business owners, retail stores, airlines, bars, hotels, low wage workers who scratch to pay rent, meat processors. School bus drivers travel their routes to deliver food to families that depend on school lunches for their kids.

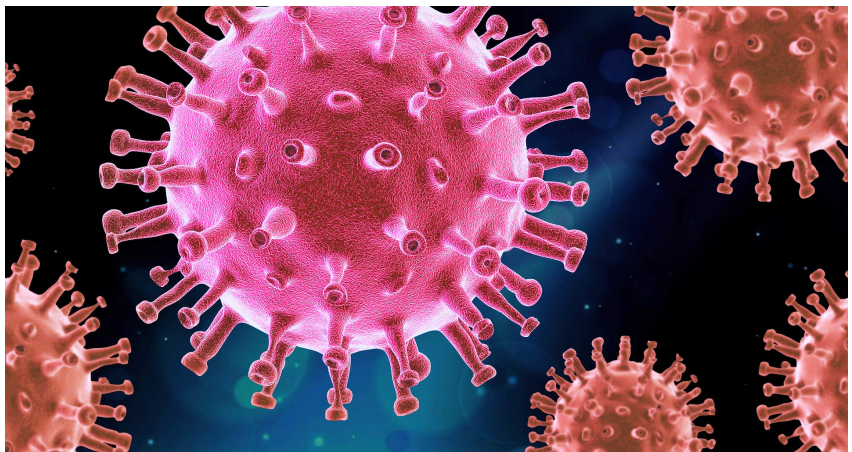
My white hair has brought out the best in my neighbors—chicken rice soup from apartment 306, hamburger-spinach bake from 207,

shredded pork from a niece, cookies from another. They drove by, dropped off, and left containers at the door.

Then the nation watched the Third Precinct burn in Minneapolis and thousands join in protesting the death of George Floyd. "I can't breathe," Floyd repeatedly said as he lay for eight minutes and forty-six seconds face down, hands cuffed behind him, a police officer's subduing knee on his neck, a violence African Americans know too well.

Protests and prayer for justice began and persisted. It's our neighborhood. Each day people with bags and brooms swept up the broken glass of neighbors' lives and livelihoods? Taking eight minutes and forty-six seconds of silence has become a prayer and sacrament of solidarity.

● What have you learned from the pandemic? From protesting for justice?



GOSPEL

What is the greatest commandment?

NARRATOR: When the Pharisees heard Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, who put a question to him about resurrection from the dead, the Pharisees assembled together. One of them, a lawyer, in an attempt to trip Jesus up, asked:

LAWYER: Teacher, which commandment of the law is the greatest?

JESUS 1: “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment.

JESUS 2: The second is like it. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments rest the whole law and the prophets.

Matthew 22:34-40



What's love got to do with it?

The Christians of Matthew's community welcome nonJews among them but find themselves in conflict with people of their own ancestry. Matthew uses Mark's gospel to write his own. The changes Matthew makes in his version of Sunday's gospel suggest the community for whom he writes is experiencing conflict.

In Mark's gospel a scribe asks which law is greatest because he likes Jesus' teachings on other topics. He agrees with Jesus' answer. Jesus in turn assures the scribe he is not far from the kingdom of God. Matthew replaces the friendly scribe with a lawyer who wants to test Jesus.

The law of Moses in the first five books of the Old Testament contains 613 laws. Some of

these laws state basic moral imperatives, but many other laws describe specific cases. For instance, what if a farmer's ox gets mired in mud on the Sabbath? Does saving the ox break the third commandment, which requires resting from work on Sabbath?

The Pharisees, like lawyers today, had to apply the law to new questions. Books recording cases line the libraries of law offices. Each past case offers potential precedents in new cases.

As law develops and evolves, people must ask as the Pharisee does in Sunday's gospel: what is foundational? The Romans' destruction of the Jewish temple in A.D. 70 creates a radical break with Israel's past religious traditions. When Matthew writes in the A.D.

80s, this break intensifies the question—on what foundation do we build the future?

Jesus answers the question of what is basic with the verb *love*, a call into relationship and community. He quotes two commandments long on Israel's books, Deuteronomy 6.5 and Leviticus 19.18. Love must characterize our most fundamental relationship with God and all others.

● What other verbs say “love” to you?

● What demonstrates love most convincingly to you?

Jesus' first commandment identifies three dimensions of the human person—heart, spirit, and mind. Heart represents the whole self. All of us human beings must size up what we believe about what is and will be. The Latin word *credo* (I believe) originates from two root words—*cor* (heart) and *do* (to give). To what or whom do we give our hearts as the sure foundation of our lives? Jesus' first commandment calls us to set our hearts on nothing less than God.

In the word *soul* the first commandment recognizes we humans are conscious, spiritual beings. We exist without having made ourselves and must ask throughout our lives for what purpose. We often long for those we love when we are apart yet never succeed in fully communicating when we talk face to face. We live in mystery that we experience within ourselves and with others. We desire our loves to last forever but must trust



those we cherish to the promises of Jesus. There is more to each of us than any but the Ultimate Other can touch.

Mind is our third human capacity to bring to loving God. We humans have minds, so we can think about what really matters, envision what the world is about. The great commandment calls us to use our minds, to construct our best vision and farthest goal, to laugh at failure, remember success, to cry, sing, dance, praise, to start over and over.

- What sustains your heart and its commitment to God?
- What nourishes your spirit and opens you to the mystery of God's presence?
- How do you use your head in loving God?

Jesus' second great commandment makes explicit that love of God is inseparable from love of neighbor and love of self. The Ten Commandments have the same two divisions. The first three describe how to love God and the other seven describe how to love neighbors. When

people live the commandments, they create a community. They worship God and no other; they rest from enslaving work; they honor parents and respect others' marriages, property, reputations, and lives.

Gospel love is not an idea or an emotion but an imperative—a call to act. The great commandments recognize that acts of love weave us into community, just as selfish and violent acts fray the social fabric. The commandments are more than rules to keep and thereby gain heaven. The actions to which they call us are the hammer and nails of Christian community.

Christian life is social, Pope Francis reminds us in *Joy of the Gospel* (177-179). The evangelization to which the pope calls us starts with recognizing God's love for us, love we cannot help but share. At the heart of the gospel is life in community and engagement with others. No one is alien.

- How can we fail to share God's love for us with others?
- Who that you once considered different have you treated as a neighbor?



Once Israel was oppressed.

The Israelites as a people originate in an escape from slavery in Egypt. The ancient Pharaoh, who in golden ceremonial armor incarnated the sun god, is a prototype oppressor. He doesn't respect human beings but makes them slaves for his own purposes. He values the Hebrews only for making bricks and building cities, not as people made in God's image with certain rights.

The slaves cry out to God. They speak their suffering to the only one they can imagine to be more powerful than Pharaoh, the only one in whom they can hope for freedom. God hears their cry and remembers them.

At the heart of Israel's origin is their experience of being an alien—the neighbor who is different, other, less,

and dangerous, yet useful for physical work. Israel's law draws on that experience to teach new generations to treat aliens as if they were kin and to recognize that God hears the oppressed—the slave, the widow, the orphan, those at the bottom whose only hope is God.

God is compassionate.

“You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans.

“If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner by demanding interest. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it before sunset; for this cloak is the only covering the person has. What else has he or she to sleep in? If he or she cries out to me, I will hear; for I am compassionate.”

Exodus 22.20-26

Many among us experience being powerless, without voice in decisions. Some of us get let go from work, marginalized, put aside as useless. Some of us experience

exploitation, benefiting others without sufficient benefit to ourselves. Those of us left out, left behind, exploited, or violated call the rest of us to mend our society.

At great risk immigrants ride trains north to a better life from Central America through Mexico to the United States. They find work in egg plants, meat packing, dairies; they settle down and have children—only to have raids split up families, deport fathers, and leave mothers confined with ankle bracelets and unable to work.

Boats crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Libya to France or Italy capsize, drowning immigrants escaping violence in Sudan or looking for work in developed countries. Women migrate now more than in the past, many young and vulnerable to trafficking. Most migrate to find work, sometimes to escape war or disasters. They become aliens in new lands.

The exodus story provides scriptural testimony that God hears the voices of the oppressed. In the Egypts of every age the voices of the oppressed call those at the center to act with justice and make the human family whole.

● For whom in the news are you feeling compassion? Whose cries do you hear?

● Who have you seen exploited?

● To what work for justice do these experiences call you?

PRAY

Decide together on a group commandment that calls you to action in your parish or neighborhood or that calls you to speak your own experience of oppression as a source of potential renewal.

LEADER: God, you accept no status quo that excludes some and exploits others, yet we stand before you as First World Christians who need to hear the voices of the poor.

ALL: Help us welcome the different into our lives and stand together against the dangerous. Amen.



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CHARITY

JUSTICE

DO SOMETHING

- Decide on three concrete ways that you can help build trust and love among the neighbors where you live.
- Visit Habitat for Humanity online for ways to volunteer in your area or internationally.

Visit goodgroundpress.com for a daily prayer.