

By Father J. Michael Byron

**A**t the center of your group open a bible to Deuteronomy 6.2-6, Sunday's first reading and part of Sunday's gospel. Light a candle beside the bible. Pray together.

**LEADER:** Hear, O people of God—

**ALL:** The Holy One is our God.

**LEADER:** Hear, O people of God—

**ALL:** The Holy One is God and creator of all.

**LEADER:** Open our ears, Holy One, to the Word you spoke to our spiritual ancestors, the people of Israel—

**ALL:** And to the Word you speak to us today. Amen.

**H**igh on a hill overlooking Boston Harbor is an historic colonial-era cemetery. Inside its gates are some of the oldest grave sites in New England. The weather-worn stones of the Copp's Hill Burying Ground offer a silent and often charming testament to the lives of the people who once inhabited the city's North End.

On one of those fading slate tablets is etched these words:

*Reader: Beneath this stone is deposited the remains of Major Thomas Stewart, who gallantly fought in our late Revolutionary War, and through its various episodes behaved with patriotic fortitude, and so died in the calms of domestic felicity, as becomes a true and universal Christian.*

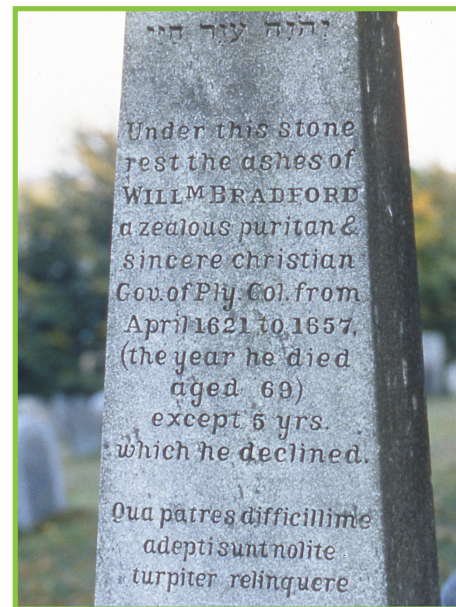
# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

**O**ften enough, grave stones are small but permanent testimonies to what people regard as the very most important insights into life. Most likely Major Thomas Stewart is no longer known to anybody today, but to ponder the inscription at his grave is to feel for a few moments as though he is reaching out to us. He addresses "Reader" with something important that he wants to have us know. Major Stewart invites us to ponder the virtues of patriotism, courage, faith and family. In his lifetime he had found these to be the things that matter the very most.

Other gravestones I have seen also try in a word, a phrase, or a personal proverb to make one final and lasting proclamation to this planet about what ultimately is true and right—words that try to capture a whole life in a few inches of granite. I recall the grave of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Atlanta and its inscription: Free at last; free at last; thank God almighty, I'm free at last.

And at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany, where there were no bodies left to bury, the sobering admonition on the tablet: Never Again. And the sweet



simplicity of the poetry carved into the tombstone of a friend of mine: You are my greatest comfort, my greatest love, my God.

To conjure up some of those epitaphs is also an opportunity to wonder how, given the chance, I might choose to say in a sentence or two what the most true and rich and beautiful realities of life really are. What would I want the world to hear from me as a testament for the centuries to come? What do I feel the most passionately about? What am I most concerned that people not be allowed to forget?

● **When all is said and done, what really matters?**

● **What do I hold as of ultimate value? Who might know what to put on my stone? How apparent is what gives my life meaning and passion?**

# GOSPEL

## Jesus sums up the whole law.

**NARRATOR:** After listening to Jesus arguing with the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Herodians, one of the scribes who recognized how well he answered approached Jesus.

**SCRIBE:** What is the greatest of all the commandments?

**JESUS:** The greatest of all the commandments is “Hear, O Israel! The Lord your God is Lord alone. Therefore, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” That is the greatest, and the second is, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” No other commandments are greater than these.

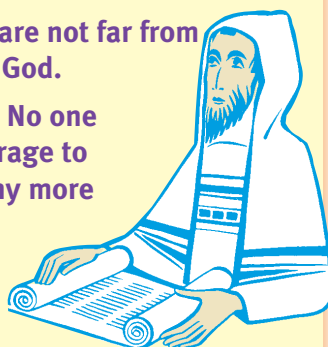
**SCRIBE:** You are right, Teacher; you have truly said, “God is the One, and beside God there is no other.” Yes, to love God with all our heart, with all our thoughts, and with all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, is worth more than any burnt offering or sacrifice.

**NARRATOR:** Jesus approved the insight of this answer.

**JESUS:** You are not far from the reign of God.

**NARRATOR:** No one had the courage to ask Jesus any more questions.

Mark 12:28-34



words. They are right out of the Hebrew bible. They are the words contained in the *mezuzot* that Jews have fixed to the posts of their doorways for centuries. They are the words that ultra-orthodox Jews keep, literally, bound to their wrists and foreheads. They are the words uttered every day of a Jewish life of prayer. And they are words of love: for God, for neighbor, and for self.

Jesus said and did a lot of things in his life. He taught and preached at length; he healed and worked miracles; he prayed and forgave and consoled and cast out demons. His was a busy life, and in many ways a bewildering one.

It was a life that left his disciples often scratching their heads in confusion or feeling let down by false expectations. They were baffled by parables, uncertain in their understanding, speechless in the face of miracles, ashamed by the recognition of their own unworthiness. They were very much like us. That is why, even though the question in Sunday's gospel was put to Jesus by teachers intent to trap him, we can be very glad they asked.

● What actions do the two great commandments inspire in you?

● How are the two great commandments influencing your consideration as you prepare to vote?

## What does Jesus think really matters?

Thankfully, Jesus wasn't in his tomb long enough for anyone to start thinking about carving mementos on it. But we don't have to wonder how Jesus would respond to the question of what he'd want to say in a sentence or two. He tells us today in the gospel. He was being questioned, again, by the Pharisees, the Jewish lawyers and experts in the Hebrew scriptures. They were trying, again, to trap him into saying something scandalous.

For Jesus, as for all good Jews, there was no religious obligation more sacred than to keep the Law of Moses, the commands of the Torah, all 613 of them as spelled out in

the Pentateuch. And so their quest for entrapment was easy: Just get Jesus to pick one of the commands as the greatest, and then he could be accused of being soft on all the others.

But Jesus chose wisely. He gave them, and gives us, in a couple of sentences his epitaph. It is his summation of what it's all about, what the meaning of his whole life boils down to.

They are words which all of his original audience already knew well: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus didn't make up these





“**W**hen all is said and done, Lord, what’s the bottom line?

What measure are we to use in order to know whether we have understood you well? What might your epitaph be? What would you want the world to hear about you from now until granite melts away?” Comes the answer, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.

Unfortunately, some Christians mistake Jesus’ disagreements with other Jewish teachers and authorities to mean Jesus disagrees with and rejects all Jews and Judaism. They don’t notice that these disagreements happen all in the family. Jesus is a Jew among Jews, whose first disciples were all Jews. Christian Jews and Jews following other rabbis did not

split into separate groups until the end of the first century.

Sunday’s gospel shows how deeply Jesus’ teaching draws on God’s word spoken in Israel’s history. But Christian persecution of Jews over the centuries testifies to a tragic misconception of the gospel message. Until the Vatican II reform of the liturgy, Catholics prayed for the conversion of “the perfidious Jews” in the Good Friday liturgy.

Only in 1965 did the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time) acknowledge the permanent validity of God’s covenant with the Jews. The document takes Paul’s point of view that “the Jews still remain most dear to God because of their ancestors, for God does not repent

of the gifts God makes nor of the calls God issues” (Romans 11.28-29).

*Nostra Aetate* insists the Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in other religions (#1). The bishops of the council state that what happened in Jesus’ passion “cannot be blamed on all Jews then living without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today” (#4).

● What tensions do you experience in relating to people whose faith differs from your own?

● What model for Jewish-Christian relationships today does Jesus’ dialog with the scribe offer?



## What’s Jewish about Jesus’ message?

**D**euteronomy is the fifth book of Torah or the Law, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures—Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. These books combine narrative and law—stories about Israel’s earliest ancestors, the escape from Egypt, and wanderings in the desert; and collections of laws that include the 10 commandments. Like Jesus, many rabbis considered Deuteronomy 6.4-5 the heart of the Law.



## Moses Sums Up the Whole Law

**Moses told the people: Fear Yahweh, your God, and all the days of your lives keep the laws and commandments which I enjoin upon you, your children, and your children's children; thus, your days will be long. Hear, Israel, and carefully do these things, that you may grow and prosper in keeping with the promise of Yahweh, the God of your ancestors, to give you a land flowing with milk and honey. Hear, O Israel, the Holy One is our God, the Holy One alone! Therefore, you shall love the Holy One, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take these words which I command you today to heart.**

Deuteronomy 6.2-6

It is not often that our Sunday scriptures provide us with the very same words in the First Reading and in the gospel. But by citing Deuteronomy's so-called "Great Commandment," Jesus invites us to remember that our Christian heritage is rooted in that of our Jewish ancestors.

Jesus himself was a Jew and had no interest in presenting his gospel in opposition to the Law of Moses. The ancient Israelites also had love as the ultimate purpose for their faith and their laws as their heirs still do today.

Sadly, we have had a history of not remembering that consistently, and Jewish people

have sometimes suffered greatly at the hands of so-called Christians. Thankfully, the past 50 years have seen a great mellowing of bad feelings between the two traditions, thanks to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

With the encouragement of Christ's epitaph today—which is really a very Jewish one—we may dare to pray for the strength to make this first and greatest commandment real in our daily lives. We may dare to expect from God the "fortitude" (as Major Stewart might call it) to be a true and loyal disciple, and so one day to experience the "calms of eternal felicity."

- What is a way you have experienced the holiness and mystery of God?
- Whose God is your God?
- How much do you know about the Jewish religion and its practices?

## PRAY

**LEADER:** Let us reflect on who our neighbors are, the people Jesus' second commandment asks us to love as we love ourselves. Who comes to mind in your neighborhood, at work, in our world?

*Pause briefly.*

**LEADER:** Jesus, you ask us to live out our complete loyalty to God in how we love our neighbors. Let us pray for their needs and for our generosity.

*Respond to each petition:*

**ALL:** Help us love our neighbors as ourselves.

**LEADER:** Let me be a companion to all who love you, Holy One, all who keep your laws.  
**ALL:** The earth, O Holy One, is full of your steadfast love.



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### Faith Sharing Tip

Eric Law, an Episcopal priest, suggests a process of mutual invitation when a group wants to hear from everyone or offset a person who monopolizes conversation. The process assumes people are sitting in a circle and can see each other. A leader shares his or her response to a question and invites a

### Mutual Invitation

second person to speak. This person can be anyone sitting anywhere in the group. Each new person can either pass or share; in either case, the person has the privilege of inviting a new person into the process. (See Eric H. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*, 113.)