

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
Deuteronomy 28: 1-6
Matthew 22: 34- 40

Motivation
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When you were bringing up your children, or were being brought up by your parents, what was used to make kids behave, or to act like decent human beings? There is always the ploy of setting a good example and hoping it rubs off. There are rewards, or an allowance for chores done. There is encouragement, affirmation, compliments... all tried and true methods for producing the desired effect. And then, there's good, old-fashioned fear. That reminds me of a story:

Two 8- and ten-year old brothers were always acting up and getting into mischief at church. Their parents decided to send the boys to talk with the pastor of the church, a Bible-thumping, God-fearing, pulpit-pounding preacher. The 8-year-old had the first appointment.

The pastor decided to take a theological approach, and glowered at him.

"Young man, where is God?"

No response from the terrified boy.

"Young, man," he bellowed, "where is God?"

In terror the boy leaped from his chair, ran home, vaulted up the stairs to his bedroom, and hid.

The 10-year-old, hearing the noise, ran into his younger brother's bedroom and found him shivering in the closet.

"What happened?" he said, starting to get scared himself.

"Oh, man, are we in deep trouble," said the 8-year-old. "God's missing, and they're trying to pin it on us."

So much for fear: it can lead to a lot of misunderstanding. What else could motivate us to behave – and what exactly is good behavior? These are questions that all religions of the world seek to unravel and answer.

In the 28th chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, we seem to find one answer. Today we heard a series of blessings: "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field..." all the way to "Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl." These are the blessings that come to those who obey God. What we did not read were the curses – there is a corresponding set of curses that follow. By the way, the curses are a lot longer and more detailed than the blessings. This is what we might call the carrot and the stick approach to obedience. It is formulaic (this was actually the form for political treaties as well): do this and only good things will happen; do that and only bad things will happen. It is a framework for behavior, and it works, some of the time. We can all think of good people whose lives seem cursed and bad people whose lives seem to prosper. Blessing and cursing – that is one motivator.

The other passage from Deuteronomy is a bit more subtle. Once again, it is written as though Moses is giving advice to the generations that will follow him. It describes a formula for bringing offerings to God. It does not say, "Bring the offering –or else!" It says, that when the wandering people have finally arrived in a fertile, arable land, they should harvest some of the good things from the land. They should bring them to a holy place. And once there, they should

remember, out loud, the story that brought them there: the story of their ancestors. And not just remember and recite: they will actually identify with the people brought out of slavery. The voice speaking switches from “them” to “us.” And once they have given to God, in great gratitude, from the harvest, they should celebrate. A big celebration that includes everyone – even the foreigners who are living amongst them. Another framework: harvest, bring, remember, give, celebrate. Nothing about fear or punishment, just an overwhelming sense of belonging and gratitude and grace.

Both of these passages were and are part of the Hebrew tradition. Both informed their understanding of the Law and the Prophets. Both were quite familiar to Jesus and the other Jews of his time. When Jesus is questioned by the well-educated Pharisees, they were working with all this material, testing each other, so to speak, on how to live it all out in their own time and place. When asked which commandment in the law is the greatest, Jesus is not going to come up with some new innovation. He states the obvious, the commandment to love God with all one’s heart and soul and mind. But he adds the codicil, also from the Hebrew Bible, from Leviticus, that one about loving your neighbor as yourself. Jesus links the two commandments as the framework for all law and prophecy.

So, I might ask, two questions at this point. One - what motivates a person to obey these commandments to love? - and two – what does it look like when they do so?

I am going out on a limb here and suggesting that a big angry preacher bellowing “Where is God?” is not going to help us much here. I do not see how threats of punishment can make us love. There is something stronger at work here, something we catch a glimpse of in the description of the first fruits offering. Something about remembering and belonging and gratitude and celebration.

The theologian Marcus Borg has called the twin commandments in our Matthew passage not “the greatest commandment” but the “great relationships.” He wrote, “at the center of a life grounded in the Bible is the twofold focus of the great relationship.” Borg also wrote that justice is “the social form of love.” “Justice is what love looks like in public,” says Cornel West. Jesus interpreted the great relationship through crossing boundaries in his own time: boundaries of class and gender and tribe. It got him into a lot of trouble.

When Jesus tells us to love God with every fiber in us, we may have a hard time comprehending exactly how that looks or feels. The additional “loving our neighbor as ourselves” helps us out here. It gives us a concrete way to love God. I want to say, “Thank you, Jesus, for giving me something to work with here, because I am not so good at abstractions.” I can wrap my head around justice, and do something. I can wrap my head around compassion, and do something. Our teacher is not saying that we need to have warm fuzzy feelings about God and every human— which is impossible. The great commandment, the “great relationship,” is demonstrated by action, not feelings. The surprise is, sometimes our hearts do get warmed by the action. Love becomes a risk. It gets us into the same kind of trouble Jesus encountered.

Churches spend a lot of time on a lot of things. Churches have programs and projects, we have theological arguments and conversations, we build buildings and we seek to expand our outreach. But remember the core, the foundation of love, is the great relationship. That is why we are here.

We are here to be stretched by the greatest commandment. At times, to question ourselves: When have we put boundaries around our own commitment to love our neighbor? Which of God's children live on the other side of those boundaries? How comfortably do we live on this side of them, all the while thinking that we too are faithful to the two great commandment or relationships? We are stretched and challenged to examine all this in a place of truth and spiritual security

Relationship is our motivation for giving our time and treasure to the church. Some of us may be following that ancient formula given by Moses: harvest, bring some of that harvest to a holy place, place it in the offering basket, and remember. Remember all those who came before us in this place: their struggles and their triumphs and their sorrows and their joys. Identify with those ancestors in faith, whose spirits form a cloud of witnesses around us even now. Then, give and celebrate. In this way we live out our relationship to the people of our tradition, with great love gratitude and joy.

Some of us will be following another formula: one which says that we have found a place where the Greatest Commandment can begin to take on some real expression. We love God, and we want to love what the Beloved loves. We have found a place of blessing. We have found ways to make love visible as justice. We treasure the relationships that have been formed through common work and study and prayer. The celebration is built into the fabric of those relationships. We give of ourselves with great love and gratitude and joy.

I do not need to tell you that we live in a world and in a culture where this is not the norm. Fear is still a prime motivator for many people. So much of religion is infected by fear. Jonathan Swift wrote, more than 200 years ago, "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another." Or we might say, we have just enough religion to make us fearful, but not enough to draw us into relationship with one another.

Here and now, in our season of harvest, we bring our first fruits to God. But we do not start with a basket of grain or even a check in the offering plate. We start with our hearts and souls and minds. We start with a recommitment to the greatest commandment and to the relationships that grow from it. We move on to the social form of love, which is justice. We move on to many acts of mercy and caring. Our hearts are at risk, and they are warmed. Like Jesus, we may get into some trouble here. We are so grateful, though, for the blessings of relationship. We don't have time to be afraid, because we have so much to give. And we certainly don't want to miss the celebration. Where is God? Here, and now, the Beloved is loving us. Amen.