

Proper 25 Year A
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
October 29, 2023
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, **make us love what you command**; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

There was an episode in the popular sitcom “The Big Bang Theory,” when the character Sheldon is quite unhappy with a television show that ended its season with a cliffhanger. Then the show was canceled; there was no next season, no resolution to the cliffhanger. Surely the show was not over – Sheldon had no closure – how could there be no finish? We live in a culture that tells us we have to wrap everything up; we must finish whatever it is that we start. Like Sheldon, this “not finishing” might drive us at least a little crazy. On the TV show, Sheldon’s girlfriend tried to cure him: she intentionally begins and does not finish: a game of tic-tac-toe, the national anthem. She does not allow a jack-in-the-box to pop, to blow out all the candles on a cake, or, after an elaborate dominoes set-up, to knock them down. And there is this: (Knock da da da da [stop]). NO! Leave it there. We have to finish what we start. Sheldon thought that not finishing felt like he “ripped his face off and shredded it. How does not finishing feel to you? We, too, want closure. We have to finish: our plate, a book, the movie, the song. We must watch the dominoes that we set up so carefully, tumble in an orchestrated, precise pattern.

And then there’s Moses. We just heard:

The Lord said to Moses, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command.

Moses did not finish his forty year path. He did not cross into the Promised Land. Was he a failure? No. Moses died “at the Lord’s command.” “Not finishing” was God’s plan, and I have come to think that “not finishing” was a gift to Moses’ life. God shows Moses the fulfillment of his life: here it is. You won’t go there: gaze upon it, and be filled with and in the promise alone. Over and over God says “I am with you.” I, the Lord, set the path for you. I will complete my promise, finish the path. Go in peace, Moses.

For those still in agony about those two other knocks, go ahead – finish it up so you can come back. In the TV show, as soon as Sheldon’s girlfriend left, Sheldon went back and finished everything: a tic-tac-toe game. He lit and then blew out all the candles on a cake, reset the elaborate dominoes and watched their methodical fall, and he sang the entire national anthem. So, are you good now? Good. We compel ourselves to finish, and often because we want to know who wins and who loses. We must win. This was the setup for the authorities’ many questions to Jesus. They were trying to make Jesus slip up. On what grounds will we arrest him?

Is he a traitor or a heretic? We need to know because he is a threat to our way of life. We must do something about Jesus.

The thing is, we cannot “do something” about Jesus. Jesus loves for us to come into his presence and be transformed. And we cannot finish the commandment that Jesus gives us:

“‘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.’

There is no treason, no heresy, just love. This is God’s promise to us, fulfilled in Jesus on the cross, risen and ascended back to God. God’s promise is not finished; we wait for Jesus to come again. It is not for us to know when that will happen. We can gaze upon the promise in our hearts; indeed, we will never run out of ways to learn to love with “all” – all of our hearts, soul, mind. This is our lifetime’s work. Its completion is in God’s time.

What if we, as the church and as Christ’s body in this world, focused not on finishing every task but on laying the foundation and showing everyone who comes through these doors the love that Jesus commands? How will we encourage and equip everyone who walks in these doors to then walk out these doors and show the love of Christ to everyone we meet? What if.

At a service this week, our bishop reminded us that the world is starving. **We** are the world, and the world is starving on our watch. Will we let the world starve to death? Our vocation is to love one another and to love our neighbors, because when people are starving they will eat garbage. We have exactly what will fill these many starving people, and that is the love of Christ. We are called, with all of ourselves, to love, and to equip ourselves and then the world to love and serve the Lord. Bishop Daniel said: “our job, oh, church, is to bring the love of the living God to people to who are dying without it.” We know what will give people life.

In our collect today we prayed that we will “love what God commands. Make us love what you command.” We asked God for that. In the gospel of John (15.12-13), Jesus adds detail to the command: “¹²This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

That’s love. We are all called to love God with all of ourselves, to love our neighbor the same way, and to carry that love out in the way in which Christ loved us. Back to the bishop who said that my job, your rector’s job, “is to remind you from time to time, the meaning of the word love. Love. Love is I would lay down my life for you. I will feed you with my last donut. I will walk with you to a place that you fear to go. Love is not I agree with you. Love is not I think you’re fine the way you are. That isn’t love. It’s something, but it isn’t love. Love is I will go with you, anywhere. I will feed you even when I don’t know where your hunger comes from.”

Love is not a task to complete. Love is a vocation that we cannot finish, and we are not supposed to. God’s gift to Moses and God’s gift to us is that God is with us on our journey. God knows “the rest” of our story. God may choose – it’s God’s plan – to bring us to a place from which we can see how God will complete God’s covenant in this place. We will not finish the journey because God is not finished with us.

As we continue into our fifth year together, know that I am deeply thankful for every one of you. I came here after we met one another and the Holy Spirit jumped into our gathering and let us know that we are to be Jesus' hands and feet in this part of God's kingdom. You are good at welcoming and loving. You find and show love to the people who come here.

In Eucharistic Prayer C we say: Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Now we need to recognize our strength, our fullness in Christ, and feed this starving world. We are renewed in the Spirit, so we go forward, not in fear, but in faith, courage, and love. God is with us.

We are to be a holy people. Holy. Back to the bishop's words. What holiness means is something that is set aside for the use of, or in the worship of God. We are to be a holy people. Which means we're going to have to fight for the clarity of our own hearts. Don't let impure things turn you away from the love of God to something else. Don't let anger in. Don't let fear in. Don't let the righteousness that comes from thinking you've done something on your own, in. Stay holy, committed to the love of God.

Because the world around us is made to love God. But the world gets caught up in fear, in survival mode, in status and prestige. Keep Christ's love first. Remember that love when you are called to do something you're afraid of. Like serving on vestry. Rectors sometimes ask us to do something that we fear. Serve on vestry. Hand out quarters at a laundromat. Give of your time and treasure with love. Tithe. Come to Christian Formation, to a bible study, because we are not finished learning. Make coffee. Pull weeds. Plant the love of Christ in someone else's heart. Feed the world in that way. What is it that Jesus will have you do? Do that. God is with you.

Our bishop's vision for the church is that each parish is an entity in the kingdom of God. That everyone who steps foot on this property is a citizen, a full citizen, of grace. Finally, he said, remember: keep fear outside the door. Keep anger outside the door. Keep every other righteousness other than the righteousness of God in Christ outside of this place. We will discover, as we have already tasted, that God's mercy will flow ... and that the abundance of the harvest will come in due time.

Amen.