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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 25
October 29, 2017
Matthew 22:34-46

Living the past twenty years in Texas, I have missed the East Coast beaches...the beaches of my childhood. Compared with the coast here, Texas beaches are really disappointing. First of all, that part of the Gulf of Mexico is more like the drain in the tub – it's where all the seaweed, jellyfish, and debris from the Gulf ends up. Strolling at the water's edge can be a tricky endeavor as you sidestep trash, plastic, and sometimes, heaven forbid, medical waste and oil. The area is entirely flat, largely devoid of sand dunes. Adding to the disappointing milieu of the Texas beach experience, vehicles are allowed to drive on much of the coast. So, not only do you need to pick one's way through the debris in the sand but you also must watch out that you don't get run over.

The water in that part of the Gulf is an unflattering flat gray color (or sometimes brownish) and since it is so shallow, there is little in the way of waves. You will have to work really, really hard to surf there. Staring out to sea, the horizon is cluttered with offshore oil rigs and oil tankers steaming in and out. And if that is not disheartening enough, when you turn your attention inland, you are frequently granted vistas of oil refineries. Now, this is not to say that there aren't some nice beaches along the Texas coast, but largely I have found them to be a unsatisfactory.

Growing up in North Carolina, just about every summer of my childhood I went to the coast for a week, sometimes two. My childhood experience of the beaches of North Carolina was nearly the opposite of those of Texas, with clean sand and water, an active surf, and ringed by lovely dunes. The beaches I went to in the 1970's and early 80's were much less populated than what you find now along the Texas coast. This meant that an only child like myself could spend a lot of time in the dunes and along the water all alone.

One of my favorite times of the day at the beach was in the late afternoon and early evening, when everyone else had gone back to their cottages. I especially liked to sit on top of one of the dunes closest to the water, all by myself on an empty beach and feel the wind blow into my face. At this time of the day, the wind would pick up and blow even harder, and I would just watch the waves and look out along the horizon as the line of water met the sky. I would try so hard to see the curvature of the Earth, but I never did – it always looked like a straight line to me.

One early evening in particular, I remember standing on top of the dune, digging my feet into the sand to plant myself and feel the wind blow hard against me and buffet me. All I could hear was the roar of the wind: no radios, no talking, no cars... no people noises, at all. Just me, the crashing waves, the darkening sky and the gusting wind. I stood there surrounded by endless ocean and sand, and I felt myself begin to slip away and melt into it all. I spread my arms wide... and I found myself beginning to lean into the wind – to be supported by it. Being raised without any faith tradition, I didn't understand God. But I understood this. This feeling of one-ness, of togetherness, of rightness. I knew in those wonderful moments that I was connected to something much greater than myself and I couldn't help myself but lean into it. I think now, that what I felt was love.

In our reading today, Jesus is in the Temple in Jerusalem. Just the day before, Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the cries of "Hosanna to the Son of David!" and then he immediately went

to the Temple and stirred up all kinds of trouble. Today, Jesus is back in the Temple, and this time the religious authorities are ready for him. They publically confront Jesus and attempt to discredit him, but each time Jesus manages to outsmart and turn the tables on them. Now, the Pharisees ask Jesus, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Here, Jesus gives a very proper answer by quoting Deuteronomy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” But then Jesus continues beyond the scope of the question to add that there is a second which is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Together, Jesus says they build the framework on which hang all the law and prophets. These two commandments are separate and distinct but there is a deep relationship between them.

Jesus’ life teaches us what a life centered in the love of God looks like – he demonstrated a life of devotion to the God he called, “Father.” In everything Jesus did, his entire life was oriented toward God. Jesus also revealed what loving our neighbor looks like. And, it looks like feeding the hungry and healing the sick; eating and spending time with the outcast; rejoicing in another’s blessings and sorrowing with those who mourn; challenging those who are wrong and unloving; praying faithfully; and living life with a radical trust and reliance on God.

I believe in order to faithfully love our neighbor in any kind of way that looks like what Jesus showed us, we must first learn to love God. Learn to lean into and trust God. Love of neighbor requires our participation in God’s love – and that starts with our turning to God and grounding our lives in God. It is God’s love of us that enables us to follow these commandments. But, God’s love is also a summons – and we are called into relationship with God and to live that out in the world. Yet, as we know, this can be much more difficult than it seems.

Well, thankfully, we don’t have to rely only on ourselves...we have the abundant grace of God that will help us. But, what is required of us is to step forward and consent to be transformed by grace into the loving creatures that God intended us to be. We are called to lean into God. To trust God and the abundant grace that is given to us. Be warned, however... while leaning into God is to fall into the loving arms of God, it is also leaning into a presence that pushes back... challenging us to change and to trust. But what does this look like? What does it mean to “lean into God”?

For me, leaning into God looks like trust. Faithful trust in God to put the next foot forward with confidence, however tentative it may be at the time, that the ground will rise up to meet me. In my life, leaning into God has looked like stepping forward in faith to do something important when I don’t know what will happen, but trusting God to provide what I need, when I need it.

Leaning into God has looked like quitting my career and asking my family to sacrifice so that I can go to seminary and pursue my calling to the church. For others, leaning into God may look like daring to risk angering others to speak truth to power. It may look like taking in and caring for a relative who is having a hard time and hasn’t been able to find a job in a year. It may look like stretching in faith to make a financial pledge to Good Shepherd for the first time or daring to increase last year’s pledge, trusting that, with God, there will be enough. Leaning into God looks like all of this. Each act of trust strengthens us to lean in even more.

It would be ridiculous to say that what I experienced at the beach in my childhood was loving God with all my heart, soul and mind. It certainly wasn’t. Learning to love and trust God is something that takes a lifelong journey. But God’s grace is always poured out for us, should we be awake enough or desperate enough to take it in and be transformed. Growing in God’s love shapes us into people who can then truly love our neighbor. But the journey starts with the

first step, the first consent to trust. And just maybe, it can start with a little girl at the beach with her arms stretched wide who is leaning into the wind....

\Amen.