10.25.26 Pentecost 25, Matthew 22:34-46, St Barts, Yarmouth
Sermon by the Rev. Ben Cooke

Well, good morning; it's a joy to join you today. You may have noticed that I'm not Rev. Amanda. Don't panic; she's fine and up at the church I serve, Emmanuel in Augusta. Emmanuel is a federated church of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine and the ELCA Lutheran Synod of New England. Which means I get to be both a Lutheran and an Episcopalian. Today Emmanuel is celebrating Reformation Sunday, a feast of the Lutheran church, when they remember Martin Luther starting the Reformation by hammering 95 Theses on a church door. Very dramatic and noble. Episcopalians don't have an equivalent event we look back to. Our Reformation started when someone wanted his first divorce. That someone was King Henry VIII of England, who, infamously, had six wives, two of whom he murdered. Anyway, my background is Episcopalian and Amanda's is Lutheran, so today we have done what is called a pulpit swap, so she can go be a Lutheran for a day and I can be an Episcopalian and not have to think too hard about England's Reformation story.

Thinking about the stories, the histories of our people can be hard, not just because there's a lot that went wrong, times when we failed, but also because there's also so much good stuff. It can be overwhelming wading through the tales of all the good that God has done. Looking for the core of the message that will connect us to God's love now. That's the challenge of preachers every Sunday, and it's the challenge the Pharisees in today's gospel bring to Jesus. Tell us, Jesus, out of the 3000 years' worth of interaction with God, out of the many books of Hebrew scriptures, what is the greatest commandment God has given us? They act like it's a gotcha question from the press, but Jesus doesn't hesitate; he is very clear. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second Commandment is like it: love your neighbor as yourself.

The Pharisees naturally approve. They are looking to put limits on what they have to do; they are lawyers, after all. In Luke's gospel, this interaction provokes the story of the good Samaritan: who is my neighbour? How much should I love and so on? The first part of Jesus' answer seems fairly obvious: the core of Jesus' approach is not just to be religious on one day a week but to focus all of our lives on God. Look up

to God and don't blink. But life is very busy. We have to feed ourselves and our kids, go to work, spend time with loved ones, and even church can be distracting.

How many of you have sat in a service and wondered if you brought enough snacks to share when you're hosting coffee hour rather than listening to what God is telling us through our worship? I know I have. It can be really easy to forget God, or to substitute a relationship with God for ethical teachings or political affiliation, or the idea of scriptural infallibility, or God forbid, even the 1979 Prayer Book.

None of these are at the core of what Jesus teaches. Jesus is all about right relationship with God, and looking for God's love right now, moment to moment. The remedy seems simple: always be looking up to God. Then Jesus tells us that the second Commandment is *like* the first: to love your neighbour as yourself. You have to love those around you and not just God. Loving God means working with the challenge of loving others. Of finding the actions that love God and do not deprive others of their well-being. You cannot love God by removing the opportunity for others to experience God's love. You cannot love God and act out of hate.

To love God requires loving neighbors as ourselves, and equally, to love our neighbors requires loving God. If we look solely down at those around us, it is easy to fall into tribalism. Into the team mentality, into clans and cliques, into political parties and nationalism. After all, we're only looking after our neighbors; all that needs to be done to make us a group, a mob, is to hate those we cannot see. The ones over there in different colored jerseys or with different slogans on their baseball caps. That's why the first commandment comes first and why the second always comes with it, because you cannot love God and act out of hate toward others. If we walk around with our eyes fixed high into heaven, we're gonna knock people over, disregard their needs in pursuit of our own enlightenment; equally, if we spend all our time with our eyes fixed to the ground, on the worldly needs of ourselves and those around us, we are inevitably drawn into sinning. Like the blind leading the blind, we end up matched into folly by conmen and our own self-importance.

In our gospel text, Jesus continued his summation of his people's history by asking about the identity of the Messiah, as the son of David. The Messiah, or in Greek, the Christ, is David's Lord, greater than him and yet is still his son, an impossibility in a society that thought older was better. Jesus is commenting on what it means for the

world that Jesus is God incarnate. It is a logical impossibility that looking up to God might also be looking down to our neighbors' needs.

It means that when we fix our eyes on Jesus, we are not looking up or looking down, but rather looking around and seeing God in all those we meet and serve.

In the person of Jesus, God has shown us the revelation of God in everyone. All the hair splitting of our history, all the stories of faith we tell, build up to the simple truth that God in Christ Jesus chooses to be present to us. Jesus dismisses the Pharisees by reflecting back to them their heartless, hard-and-fast rules that they would impose on loving God, loving neighbour. Look up, look down, limit love. But Jesus gives to his disciples, to us, a new commandment; that is to love one another as Christ has loved us. It's a challenge and a call to see the world and all the people within it as truly loveable. To see the whole of them, warts and all, and still love them. Jesus said of the church that the world will know us when they see how much we love one another.

That is the grace Lutherans love to talk about: to know that we are seen by God and yet unconditionally loved. And that is incarnation that Episcopalians love to talk about, that we embody God's love for others. So as we continue through these troubled times, where the world around us is falling into division and hate. I encourage you to look around with the love that Jesus brought down for all our neighbors. Do we see the homeless, the drug-addicted, unrepentant racists, and those who continue to vote against where Jesus has led us? Do we see them and love them? This is the challenge of being Church in our time; and frankly, we are not up to it. Please not in our own strength fortunately, Jesus is Lord, the very love of God made flesh for all to see. And through God's grace we are given the eyes of Christ to behold all in this world with love. Amen.