



*Back in the Blacksmith Shop*  
October 25, 2020: The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost  
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*O Lord: take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire.*

It is hard to believe, but a year ago today, on this very Sunday, Bishop Gates was here to help us mark our 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Though we do “come in celebration,” as our opening hymn declares this morning, a year later, the end of our anniversary is more subdued than it might otherwise have been. You may recall from the excellent sermon some of the images of our Christ Church origin story that Bp. Gates reflected back to us: paint shop; pool hall, blacksmith shop—these were the physical elements we cobbled together in 1900 to create our first permanent worship space, over on Mellen Street and Highland Avenue.

I have to say that a year later, the image that resonates most with me is blacksmith shop. It feels like we are being transformed by hammer and fire into something different. The final product is not yet clear—but it will be strong, forged in the fire as it is.

In something like the same way, Jesus’ teaching is going through a blacksmithing process. His way of love is unfolding in the Gospel, forged in sacrifice and resulting in joy. Certainly, those who were the first disciples experienced this smelting, as did the early Christians who experienced Jesus by the Holy Spirit in Word, Sacrament and gathered Community, and indeed Christians even today.

It is the final week of Jesus life. We’ve been here for a couple of weeks. Today is the latest episode of Jesus “takes on all comers.” In the passage just before this morning’s excerpt, he has bested the Sadducees on the question of resurrection; in the scene before that one, which we heard in church last week, he whupped the Pharisees on what God and the Emperor require.

It’s important to note that growth and change usually come through some kind of resistance or conflict. Jesus is pressed into clarifying his reforming teachings because he threatens the powers that be. Our way of being Church is being threated both by the coronavirus, and, I would say, by our historic reluctance to address issues of social justice.

So, Jesus is in mortal, verbal combat with the religious authorities. A lawyer of the Pharisees tests him with a question about the greatest commandment. This is a tough question, because there were hundreds of commandments. Later on in the Jewish tradition, after Jesus, the Rabbis taught that there are 613 commandments. I imagine for Jesus it might have been something like the parent of multiple children being asked, “who is your favorite?”

When asked this question, Jesus hearkens back to core Jewish teaching. The first part of his response comes from the Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy consists primarily of Moses’ farewell speech to the Israelites, before they cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. This verse is taken from what I’m told is Judaism’s most fundamental, central, and widely recited Biblical passage: the Shema, which is Hebrew for “Hear.” So, the Shema is this: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You



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shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (For some reason, Matthew changes “might” to “mind.”)

Then Jesus begins to do something new. He’s not going to be hemmed in by the one commandment query of this provocative lawyer. He summons another passage from the Hebrew Bible. In fact, it’s from the Book of Leviticus, which Phil read this morning. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Leviticus was like a handbook of rules and guidelines that shaped the Israelites—who were in transition from slavery to freedom through the desert—into a community and a religion with ethics, rituals, leadership norms, and purpose.

But, Jesus, in one sense, is saying *nothing* new. He reaches deep into the treasure chest of Jewish teaching, which he shares with the Pharisees and Sadducees, and lifts up two precious jewels. But *here* is where he does something new: He joins these sayings together and proclaims: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” The image suggested here is that of a branch attached to a tree or a door hanging on its hinge. ([Feasting on the Word](#), vol A4, p. 215, Patrick Gray)

Jesus here asserts his Messianic authority. He joins these texts in order to smash all the limits and boundaries of neighborliness ([Feasting on the Word](#), vol A4, p. 214, Tim Beach-Verhey) and in so doing, illustrates that he is the one to follow into and through this fire into a new way of being the people of God.

What does this mean for us?

I don’t know for sure—we are still just beginning to figure this out. But I might offer these reflections:

Part of the trial by fire we are experiencing is the sharp and lingering disappointment of not being able to gather for fellowship and the Eucharist. In the Regathering Survey that was sent to the parish this past Tuesday, nearly ¾ of respondents listed fellowship before, during, and after the service as what they miss most; 2/3s listed the Eucharist. And of course, these are things that are both at the heart of our life as the Body of Christ, and bitter irony, the things that are the most risky to do.

(Parenthetically, thanks to all who have taken the time to answer the survey—the analytics say it took about four minutes to answer. Especially helpful are the candid narrative comments which put some flesh on the bones of the quantitative data.)

Part of the smithing process is also being forced to reimagine how we do these basic things, particularly gathering. We learned at the Blessing of the Animals, to see one another, even in masks, even if just for a fleeting moment, in the shadow of the Chapel, was deeply satisfying. People then enjoyed a physically distanced walk, (having signed in) following a green line, through the redone Chapel, and through the big Church to hear our new Anniversary Organ.



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Now, even though we know the Body of Christ, the Church, is not the building, we are made by our God as creatures of flesh and blood, blessedly so. It is fitting to miss beloved sacred spaces which help us to experience closeness to one another and to God. Our Worship and Arts and Regathering Teams have been reflecting on how we can recapture for a different world—a world that is likely to be with us for some time—those critical aspects of our common life. We have submitted a number of proposals to the Diocese on this point; and the Church School is sponsoring another Outdoor Gathering on Sunday November 16, to light our Advent Tree and to take part in some other safe activities. I invite you to please email me with ideas you have for safe gatherings.

I do know this—and here I’m paraphrasing Bp Gates’ sermon from last year—even in these last months, even while in the fire, “we have remained messengers. In the face of fear, we have spread the message of hope. We have been heralds of the Resurrection. We have spread the word of life, and the message of love. We have spread that word in our pastoral care for one another. We have spread it in our Knitting Ministry, in our Pastoral Response Ministry. We have been messengers of hope when we have prayed for someone and let them know we’re doing it. We have been messengers of hope when we – like the Samaritan Woman – tell a friend to “Come and see!” why this place matters to you.

We continue to proclaim hope in our devoted service at MANNA, and B-SAFE, and at St. Luc in Haiti. We have proclaimed it in our worship (technological learning curve and all!) – in the faithfulness of our prayers, and the joy of our singing. We have proclaimed it in the way we have treated one another; in the grudges we have not harbored; in the slights you have not perceived; in the forgiveness we have bestowed; in the compassion we have extended; in the generosity we have embodied; in the grace we have displayed. In partnership with one another with our neighbors, and in our diocese, we have been God’s angels!” (adapted from Bp. Gates, 10.24.2019 at Christ Church)

And as we sing *this* morning, “Knowing we are not alone, we look toward the future knowing God will meet us there, who with the spirit’s gifts will empower us for ministry.” **Amen.**