

“Shhh....”

Baccalaureate Sermon
Stone Chapel – Drury University
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by
 Robert Lee Hill
 Pastor, Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri

TEXT: Deuteronomy 6:4-5 — *"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might."*

Many thanks to President Sellars, Board Chairman John Beuerlein, and the Drury community for the gracious welcome and to Rev. David Bolling a special word of thanks for the warm hospitality. And to Karen Sweeny, deepest thanks, but I must admit I'm not exactly sure what to do with such an introduction. I think I'll take it home with me to show my wife who she's married to.

Now, before I forget, "Happy Mothers Day!" And to be an equal opportunity greeting, in anticipation of next month's festivities, "Happy Fathers Day" too! With all due respect to the liturgical purists among us who would have us eschew any and all cultural references in worship – especially something as traditional – and sometimes more than a bit sentimental – as our Mothers Days have become and our Fathers Day celebrations occasionally are – this morning must include a nod of recognition to those who gave birth to and footed the bills and prayed for the achievements of those who "will walk" this afternoon in graduation ceremonies. Consider my Mothers and Fathers Day salutation as merely another moment of fulfilling the fifth of the ten commandments, "*Honor your father and your mother....*" (Ex. 20:12) And let us remember the Yiddish proverb, with a twist, "*Because God could not be everywhere, God made mothers and fathers.*" So, "Happy Mothers Day!" and "Happy Father's Day!" too.

But secondly, and most appropriately, "Congratulations!" to all of you graduates. What a gracious moment this is. It's all over now. It's complete. *Finis*. Done. The bull is in the barn. The curtain has dropped. That last paper is in and you have now concluded this first phase of your life-long education. "Congratulations!" Yes,

what a gracious moment this is.

But because you are only finished with *this* phase of your education and not finished for life, because you may be done with classroom work here at Drury, but *not yet done* with the living of your days, there is a word, a fresh word, I believe, for you and me and for all mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, indeed for all our kin and for all people.

There is a text, well known by us all, that speaks directly to the achievements of a life lived well, to the commencement of new adventures, and to the central question of what really matters.

The text to which I refer is at the heart of Christianity.

It is *the main faith impulse* for those who would follow Jesus.

It is *the touchstone* by which Christians know their richest heritage.

It is *the foundation* of everything that Jesus stood for, taught, and embodied.

It is *the constituting moment* for Judaism out of which Christianity was birthed.

It is *the essence of Christian faith*, as it is lived out in the context of a caring church.

We call it "*The Great Commandment.*" Jesus said all the law and the prophets depended upon it and were bound together by it. Hear once again this precious text from Deuteronomy- "*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might.*"

How important is this text? Victor Frankl was the founder of the school of psychology called logotherapy, an understanding of humanity and humanity's search for meaning. Frankl forged this mode of thinking out of his World War II experiences as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz, where he would survive, even though he would witness his father's death.

The story is told of Frankl's treatment when he first arrived at Auschwitz.¹ Like all Jewish prisoners were required to do, he had to shed himself of all his possessions, including his shoes, glasses, and all his clothes. He had sewn into his clothes his most valuable treasure, a manuscript for a volume that he hoped to complete, *The Doctor and*

the Soul. When the prison officials demanded that he disrobe, he begged to keep his coat which hid his valuable manuscript. They scoffed and repeated the demand with vehemence. He did as he was commanded, and shed of himself of his clothes and thus his life's work, and, as he says in his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning*, "*struck out my whole former life.*"²

They would eventually give Frankl some other clothes, other prisoner's clothes, ragged and tattered. When he put his prison garb on, he found something hidden in a pocket. It was a portion of a Hebrew prayer book, a mere scrap of paper. And how did the ragged piece of prayer book read? "*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.*" In place of his life's work, he had received that which would truly equip him for the work of life.

*"Those words became for Frankl, a calling. And through horrible suffering they became for him a key for becoming whole, for staying centered. In all that you do, through all that you do, with all that you are: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your [might]."*³

This morning, I'm here simply to remind each of you to love God with all your heart, soul and might, and, for just a few brief moments, to place a reminding emphasis on how this sacred text relates to this day of holy closure and new beginnings. Here the text once more: "*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might.*"

That says it all, doesn't it? Jesus thought so.

"And you shall love the Lord, your God ..." with everything you have or know.

Love God – more than prestige, power, or position.

Love God – more than wealth or health or comfort or privileged condition.

Love God – more than country or country club or tribe or nostalgic time or hometown team or even origin.

Of course, we know that Jesus coupled the truth from Deuteronomy with its logical consequence; the best way to show one's love of divinity is by loving humanity.

The best way to show we love God is by loving neighbor.

Neighbors who are friends – and neighbors who are strangers.

Neighbors we like and neighbors we not sure we'll ever like.

Now, we know that love moves us to coo with warm affection when parents bring their babies before the congregation for blessing and dedication.

Love inspires us to act with courage and in congruence with our best selves, causing even the crustiest souls to become loving and gentle.

Love is the motivation and destination behind all of our preparations and traditions.

Love is what warms our homes and our hearts even in the middle of life's iciest chills.

Love is tough resistance in the face of any thing or force which would bruise or hurt or harm.

Love is the peace that abides when we let go of old habits and encrusted conventions that hinder creative growth in our individual and collective lives.

Love abides when we vigorously challenge one another to live out our best ideals.

Love is undeniably front and center in the face of any child of God who is unafraid to tell the truth.

Love is generative, moving us to seek and to offer forgiveness when estrangement has occurred.

Love is protective, moving us to provide sheltering kindness for the least, the lost and the lonely among us.

Love is baking a pie, writing a note, praying a petition, organizing a worthy project, sitting in silent vigil at the bedside with patient, earnest hope: without love, such caring acts become mere drudgery.

Love is telling children of your joy in them, complimenting someone about a new haircut, expressing thanks for someone's unique talents: without love, such transactions are mere rote rituals or, worse, sham-filled facades.

Love, God's love, love as it has been given to the world through the birth of a baby in Bethlehem long ago, love as it was made manifest on a cross and in an empty tomb, love as it is being given to new hearts even now – all of this love constitutes the reason for faith itself.

Love is truly at the heart of the way of Jesus.

But here allow me to note something that is paramount and patently clear to us all: love is hard. Sometimes it may even seem impossible. In a culture and a time in history with so many other loyalties pulling at us, loving God with all our heart, soul and might, and our neighbors as ourselves is one tall, tall order.

Graduates, if – or better said – *when* those times come in your evolving life, cut yourself some slack. When the heart breaks, and the soul seems dim, and the might wanes, know that God was supremely wise in instructing Moses to say the great commandment in the way he did. Sometimes, say, like on a particularly brutal Thursday afternoon, it's sometimes just not possible nor practical nor even feasible that a "human merely being" (to use e.e. cummings' telling phrase) can love God in totality.

That's all right. Notice that before the command to love God, there is the declaration of the unity of God: "*...the Lord our God, the Lord is one....*," the monotheistic genius of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

No longer was there then nor is there now any need for the little demi-gods before which we worship. Paul Scherer once described the occasion of a worship service like this morning's gathering as "*that moment when we bring all the little gods we have made into the presence of the one God who made us.*"

Little gods like... our appearance or our popularity or our place or even our own religion.

Little gods like ... security, national or personal, or salvation through entertainment or Wall Street or social climbing.

But the text says there is only one God, the Lord. And that can make for a lot less confusion, heartache, and daily trouble. In the place of our modern polytheism, the Shema calls us to rely upon the God who is God only and alone.

But, you say, in these uncertain times, that's another tall order. You're right! Some hard-pressed Wednesday afternoons, say, fidelity to God – to God alone and only – just might seem impossible.

Have no fear, however. Before the declaration about the one-ness of God, there is the identification of the community of faith – *“O Israel.”*

Sometimes when it seems like the height of hubristic folly – to love God, the king of the universe, the Unmoved Mover, the Creator of the Cosmos, the Lord of Life, the One, True God, the All in All – sometimes when it seems impossible to grasp the one-ness of God, it may be the best we can do is to remember the sacredness of the community of faith. *“O Israel,”* the text says. O Israel, O God's people, the people whom God loved, the people of faith, those without whom our lives would lose their savor and the future would lose its purpose.

Allow me a substitute, a synonym for the phrase *“O Israel.”* For the followers of Jesus, after a sufficient number of seasons in the Church, one of the most sacred words in the Christian vocabulary is *“Congregation.”*

“Congregation,” we say when our hearts are bursting with good news – when the engagement is announced, when the graduation – at long last – happens, when the baby is born.

Sarah Van Horn, one of diaconate members at Community, once told me a telling story about the importance of “congregation.” She said that before arriving at Community she hadn't much darkened the door of a church, except for a few weddings, including her own to Mike, her husband now of nearly twenty years. But then the baby came. And she found herself in the midst of a group of people in a building with a table in the middle of it, with a cross above it. In this group, people shared their faith together. It was a special place, a special group, a bit strange, to tell you the truth, the only place where people sang out loud together and prayed together and generally shared their greatest intimacies together.

And so I asked her, “Why did you come back to church after all those years? Was it that you wanted to be a good parent, that you needed help in that department?”

"No, not really," she said.

"Well," I pressed on, "was it nostalgia that drew you back?"

"No, not that at all."

"Well," giving up, I finally asked, "What was it?"

"I just had to thank some one," Sarah said, as she looked down at her son, Nate.

"I just had to thank somebody, and this seemed like a wonderful group of people with whom to share our joy."

"*Congregation*" - people of God - "*O Israel*." Such comforting words - in the midst of heartache - when the job goes bad, when the diagnosis says "cancer," when the depression descends, when the loved one is lost.

Where else do we go at such times, but into the gracious embrace of the congregation?

"*Congregation*" - people of God - "*O Israel*." Yes, a holy word that is not merely the object of Moses' instructions on behalf of the Lord, but also a sacred reminder of the mediator of God's love in Christ, Christ's very Body, the Church.

Now, again, if we are bluntly honest, even "*congregation*" - good old "Israel" - is a bit much to take on occasion. (Here, I am reminded of what my good friend Rabbi Michael Zedek once taught me about the twin temptations faced by every religious leader. There's the temptation of Aaron to love the people a whole lot more than you love God. And then there's the temptation of Moses to love God a whole lot more than you love the people. The trick is to keep the two in balance.)

There will come times, say, on a hard and bitter Monday afternoon, when a connection with the congregation will not do. Sometimes all of us - even the ones who love the Church more than they have words to express - experience difficulties mustering energy to say the word "*congregation*" with absolute appreciation. That's OK, by the way. In fact, it's AOK. Once more, Moses, inspired by God's powerful, holy presence, provides a safety net in the very text of Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Before the mandate to love God, before the declaration of God's one-ness, and prior to pronouncing the sacred name of the congregation, there is a simple, direct, codified

commandment that God wants God's people to follow. So on a Monday, before loving God, prior to declaring the oneness of God, before pronouncing the sacred name "congregation," you are to... **"Hear!"**

This is a primary task. This is an absolute spiritual necessity for followers of Jesus Christ. This is the fundament of faith. *"Hear!"*

And may you remember to hear God in your lives by remembering this text from Deuteronomy and the name given to it by tradition. In Hebrew it's called simply, and sacredly, the *"Shema,"* after the first word of the fourth verse of the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy. *"Shema, O Israel...." "Hear, O Israel...."*

Hear, listen, pay attention. I call it an *"onomatopoetic aspirant"* because you can hear in Hebrew the meaning which is easily discernable, amazingly enough, in English: *"Shema..." "She..." "Sh..." "Shhhhh!" "Hear!" "Listen!"*

Why "Hear"? I'm glad you asked that question. Because that's how God first expressed divine power at the dawn of all beginnings. When God leaned over the balcony of all possibility, God did what? God spoke!

No creating with lightning bolts of electric splendor or with mega watts of physical power.

No brilliant display of technicolor glory.

No visual cipher in a written text.

How did God first create at Eden's dawning? With basic words that were uttered with great grace and the expectation that they would be heard: *"Let there be!"*

Thus, we are to hear!

And thus we are to be quiet with our puny complaints, with our incessant self-absorption.

Instead, hear, listen to God's voice.

Hear, listen to God speaking in and to your own lives.

Hear ... the whisper of the dispossessed crying in the night.

Hear ... the shouts of the glad ones tasting freedom for the first time.

Hear ... the despairing masses who are numbered among the world's poor.

Hear ... the chatter of modern Americans who really yearn to speak in more meaningful ways.

Hear ... the questions of children.

Hear ... the desire for support for the elderly.

Hear ... the beating hearts of all of God's people.

Hear ... the laughter at your own wonderment and your own foolishness, sometimes in the same instance

Hear ... the welling gratitude bubbling up after a while, anywhere and anytime when God's people are engaged in worthy struggle.

Hear ... the joy that comes when truth is made plain and justice reigns and love knows limit in the human community.

So ... Remember.... *Love God!*

Recall – as often as you can – *The Lord is One!*

Say the saving word "*Congregation*" with renewed appreciation.

And "*Hear!*" – let the voice of God speak to your hearts.

And if you will do this, you will come to a new time in your life as a graduate of Drury University, and as a child of God, when you'll know that the best days are ahead of you. May you begin in that knowledge even now, right now, today. And, of course, tomorrow, on Monday, you may want to remember..... *Shema! Hear! Shhhhhh.....!*

AMEN.

NOTES

¹I'm thankful to Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for a reminder about this event in Frankl's life. This scene is also described by Rabbi David Aaron in his piece entitled "*How living the commandments empowers you to connect with God and be your true self*" at www.aish.com/spirituality/philosophy/Channeling_Spiritual_Light.asp

²*Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1965), p. 21.

³Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, Hilo Coast U.C.C., Honouliuli, HI, April 2, 2006, *The Gospel Unhindered: A Bible Study on the Book of Acts*, Lent 2006, "*Unhinderer Divided Hearts.*"