

- *For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?*
  - Our readings today are a particular blessing as we face the challenges of this moment now in our community and in the Church universal and a clarion call for us as disciples.
  - We are first reminded of the Lord's goodness to us, of God's faithfulness, of God's proximity, of God's gentle care for us, even and especially in dark times.
  - Then the claxon sounds in our second reading and, most profoundly, in the Gospel that those who recognize and call on God's faithfulness must also share that goodness with others.
- We hear in our first reading, Moses calling the Israelite to hold fast to the gift they have been given in God's Commandments and to guide their lives by what God has revealed.
  - "Commandment" is not a perfect translation of the Hebrew word "*mitzvah*."
  - Certainly, this imperfection is not about our western dislike of being commanded to do anything and I don't mean to suggest that the 10 Commandments are mere suggestions.
  - "Commandment" has the proper understanding of the binding nature of the Hebrew.
  - The Hebrew word "*mitzvah*," though, also has a deeper meaning and more profound significance because of the nature of the command, Who gives it and what is given.

- Since it is God who gives the *mitzvah* and because of what God gives in the “*mitzvah*,” it is not merely an instruction or directive that we follow out of obligation, like the law today.
- No, a “*mitzvah*” is much, much more than that. Each *mitzvah*, each command, all of them together are a **revelation** of Who God is and how God works, most especially how we can come to know God better.
- Here, “*mitzvah*” in addition to “command” can better be understood as an “opening that is offered,” an opening to the God who reveals Himself, as A God who comes close to His people Israel, who places Himself in relationship with Israel, who loves Israel.
- Obeying the commandment, then, following the *mitzvah* is not mere obligation but entering into an active relationship with God, responding to God’s initiative, loving back the God who first showed love.
- Moses calls the Israelites to respond to God’s love for and protection of them by what we know as the 10 Commandments:
  - worshipping God alone;
  - holding God’s name sacred;
  - keeping holy the Sabbath;
  - recognizing that everything is a blessing from God, rather than coveting the neighbor or the neighbor’s property;
  - or worse yet by taking God’s place as the author of life.

- More than any one of these requirements, Moses calls the Israelites to place themselves in a loving relationship with God. *For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?*
  
- But the God who reveals Himself in those commandments, and even more in Jesus Christ, does not open Himself for us in the *mitzvah*, does not come close to us only for ourselves, even as much of a blessing as our relationship with God can be.
  - Saint James in our second reading reminds that we cannot only hear the word, but we must **do** it.
  - In the word which is spoken by God, the *mitzvah* which is given by God offers us salvation, gives us an opening not only to heaven but even more to the Divine Life, to God.
  - Saint James makes clear that all comes from God, all we have and all we are, even our desire and ability to give back, to make a return.
  
- And Jesus makes perfectly clear that the ability to give and to give back to God is not limited to ourselves alone. It's not just about our relationship with the God we cannot see but about the brother and sister in need that we can see.
  - Why is Jesus so angry with the scribes and Pharisees? After all, they're obeying the commandments, they good people, doing their duty.

- Jesus is angry with them, anxious for them because they have reduced the mitzvah to obligation and they see the fulfillment of the obligation as their ticket to heaven.
- Worse yet, they refuse to show mercy to others, even to allow God to show mercy on those who suffer and struggle.
- Jesus makes clear here by His words and, even more, by his actions throughout the Gospels, that the *mitzvah*, the commandments are not just about obligation but about right relationship with God, about allowing God's love and mercy into my heart and life, and then, through me, into the world.
- It's not just rules about eating or what goes in, but about who those rules should remind us of: God who pours out on us His love and mercy. And Jesus makes clear that it is this love and mercy that should come out from inside us.
  
- This is especially true for those who suffering and struggling.
  - It's why Saint James specifies that our right relationship with God necessarily includes taking care of the widow and orphan.
  - In recognizing two classes of people in his day that could not provide for themselves, James means that we must look out for all who are suffering and struggling.
  - It's why I am so proud of and thankful for the efforts of our own Saint Teresa of Calcutta Conference of the Saint Vincent DePaul Society. They are literally going out to those in need, talking to them, working with them serving them, meeting their needs.

- But it is not just for a chosen few or for those able to offer something in the poor box or collection plate.
  - This is why these readings are both such a blessing as well as a clarion call for us at this moment in the life of our community.
  - Jesus reminds us with urgency today, that our faith is not only about doing our duty, worshipping at Mass, fulfilling our obligation or obeying the Commandments, although all of that's important. It is not just about the past and what we had and did there, although that too is important.
  - No. The exasperation and urgency of Jesus with the scribes and Pharisees reminds us that, before anything else, we must place ourselves in relationship with God. Then we see, not obligation, but *mitzvah*, an opening to God which is not just about the past, our history, indeed, not just about ourselves or our comfort.
  - Rather it is about following the example of Christ (what we would call becoming disciples) so that, by the light of our example, our intentions and our joyful service, we bring others to Jesus Christ and help them become disciples as well.
  - This is what Connect groups are all about, about helping one another to encounter and share Jesus Christ, to take the message Jesus gives us on Sunday and help it fertilize my whole week, strengthening not only in my relationship with God but also my service to my sisters and brothers.

- We're going to focus this fall on the practical ways we do that by examining our next steps as disciples, how we respond to the *mitzvah* given to us in Jesus Christ.
- This is our call as we seek to move forward as a pastorate community. Moving forward does not mean forgetting the past, forging a new identity or creating a new personality. It is not about amalgamating parishes. It is about recommitting ourselves to Jesus.
- Moving forward as a pastorate community is returning to the essence of *mitzvah*, recognizing the God who reveals Himself to us, and then taking hold of that opening to be in relationship with Him, to make a return to Him, becoming His disciples and helping others to do so.
- Is it easy? Absolutely not. And so I am grateful that we do not do it alone. Jesus has promised that He is always with us, not merely in the background, not merely as the angry judge waiting for us to step out of line or disobey a commandment.
- No. Jesus has promised to be with us as the living Presence of God in our midst, guiding us, strengthening us, helping us, loving us.
  
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