



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, February 3, 2008
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

*Festal Evensong
at 4pm*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin

on
Deuteronomy 6:1-9

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THE ODD NOTION OF LOVING GOD

I want to think with you this afternoon about the oddness of the notion of loving God. I say it is an odd notion, although to be sure the words “love God” are far from unfamiliar; indeed, the beauty of religion is often thought to be in its elevation of love. But were it not such a familiar injunction, if you were to be told today for the first time that you ought to love God, I think you should find it a very strange thing indeed.

Consider: If you came to me and asked how you could love your friend, we might talk about what your friend needs and the interests you have in common and how you and your friend fit into the broader community. If you asked how you could love people on the street, we might talk about the soup kitchen or the importance of generosity to charities or how your professional skills might be employed in volunteer work. If you asked about loving your parents, we could explore what true loyalty and gratitude is and how we give thankful expression to our connections across the generations. If you asked about loving your horrible boss, we might talk about the limitations that sin places on what is possible, and how we have to accept and work within those limitations. How do I love my wife? my husband? How do I love my son who has taken everything I gave him and run away and wasted it? How do I love my co-worker who started at the firm three years after I came but is already making more money? How do I love my host who has invited me to a banquet but has also invited my enemies? (Didn't he know?) And perhaps most difficult of all here at Saint Thomas: how do I love the person behind me who sings loudly off key?

None of these questions is easy, but you see how we could talk about them with one another. They have to do with being human together, and being human is something humans can talk over and work on. But how can I love God? I cannot go visit him, for he is in no place. I cannot take him cookies. I cannot hold his hand. Where is he, that my heart may run out to him?

And yet to love God is supposed to be the greatest thing that a human being can do; the destiny of the blessed, we are told, is to love God and enjoy him for ever.

We are just around the corner from Ash Wednesday, the somber beginning of the season of 40 days of prayer and fasting. And here on the eve of the season, the church has us read one of the ten all-time-great Bible passages, the beginning of Deuteronomy chapter 9. It is a great passage in its own right; it is also a key to the meaning of Lent.

Moses summoned all Israel and spoke to them. First he repeated for them the words which God had spoken himself, the Ten Words, the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. He told them in all solemnity that these words would bring them blessing if they would follow them and live by them and not forget them; that *it may go well with them* if they are *careful to do* these words. And then Moses summarized all the many words he had been saying in but a single sentence, so short, that every person among them could write that sentence down and memorize it, write it on their heart as it were; they could write that sentence and put it in a small pouch and wear it next to their skin every day; they could put that sentence over their door so that, going in or out, they would remember it; it was so short, they could teach it to their children even when the children were quite young.

What was that sentence? It is known as the *Shema*, which is its first Hebrew word; “shema” means “hear.” *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* The first part of the sentence states the oneness of God, his uniqueness; it might be translated “The Lord our God is one Lord” or “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” But the drive of the Shema is not to fend off polytheism; monotheism is already established—that there can be only one God is the great Hebrew discovery—no, the drive of the Shema is toward commitment: this one Lord, the only Lord who truly is, we must love him! To love God is the core of all the commandments. “Love God” is what you should bind on your heart and wear next to your skin and have over the door through which you go out and return and teach to the next generation and talk about with everyone: the one Lord is to be loved with all our heart and soul and might.

The Shema says that the point of the Law is to have complete dedication to the one Lord, indeed, to love him. And the point of reading the Shema today is to tell us that prayer and fasting, the somber liturgies, and everything else that is to come in the season ahead of us has as its point the love of God. So if love of God is the point of it all, how are we to do it?

Let us count the ways. First, indeed, is prayer. When we pray we talk with God, or at least talk to God with the understanding that he is listening even though we rarely hear from him in return. It is necessary to talk to someone you love. What’s odd about loving God is that he doesn’t reply much. But that oddness is on God’s end, as it were; it need not prevent our communication.

Second is Bible reading. The Bible is God’s Word speaking to us. That also makes it an odd book, in that other books and letters and indeed any sort of communication that was composed in the past would be thought of as past communication, whereas the Bible is somehow a present communication. But again the oddness is on God’s end; we can read the Bible as if it were new, which, oddly, it always is.

Third are the sacraments of the church. They are gifts from God to us, most of them the character-decisive presents which can be received once only but which endure decisively: baptism is the principal one here. Then there are the repetitive sacraments, God’s ongoing gifts to nourish us in our lives: preeminently, the manna of the Eucharist. The oddness, of course, is that all this gift-

giving is unidirectional, from God to us. We can't give him anything, except thanks, which are words, which takes us back to prayer.

Let those three suffice for now. It seems love of God is put in action by prayer (talking to him), Bible-reading (listening to him), and partaking of the sacraments (receiving his gifts). Yet let us be honest; these answers fall short of our question. The Shema, and the deepest human desire, is to *love God*, to reach through, break through to *him*, and not be just saying my words, reading his words, receiving his gifts. We want to break through to the giver.

And that needs to happen, not just in prayer and Bible-reading and church life, but in our hearts and on our skin and over our doorposts, wherever we go, whatever we do. To love God is to see everything as gift, to hear his word always, to speak to him continually. And how do we do that? The figure on the Cross taught us the mysterious connection of loving God and loving human beings. Where is God's hand that you can hold it? Where are God's ears that you can speak into them? Show me your neighbor, and then we shall see.