

**Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on October 31, 2021 (Proper 26, Year B)

It's become a cliché to proclaim that we live in deeply divided times. Everybody knows that. And if you have any doubts about this, all you have to do is turn on the news or log onto Facebook or talk to your neighbor.

We live in a divided nation politically, economically, racially, theologically, and in pretty much every other way you can imagine. Which isn't to say we haven't been divided for generations, we were just better at hiding it back then. But for a variety of reasons our divisions have been revealed as never before. The emotions and political machinations surrounding the pandemic have only ratcheted up the rancor and division.

I vividly remember those early days of the pandemic, when we really didn't know what we were dealing with, and you'd go to the grocery store in what felt like full body armor, and view other shoppers not as fellow human beings but as potential threats to your safety and well-being.

In many ways, that continues to be how people on opposing sides of an issue see one another — as threats rather than as fellow children of God. And the ramifications are real. Think about the relationships in your own life. My bet is a number of you have lost friendships or have seen relationships with family members fracture because of opposing views about politics or the pandemic.

So what does our faith have to say about this? How can we remain in relationship with one another despite our differences? How can we lower the temperature without compromising our values? Not surprisingly, I think Jesus offers us a path forward. In this morning's gospel passage, Jesus, echoing the ancient Jewish Law, distills the entirety of Scripture, all the Law and the prophets, and the grand arc of faith into two commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself." It all comes down to this: Love God, love neighbor. Which doesn't seem to leave much room for vilifying people who disagree with you.

But if you use loving God and loving neighbor as a filter for your own actions you are on your way to living a loving, fruitful life. Regardless of what others do, everything you do, every action you take, can be done in light of the call to love God and love neighbor. It's harder in practice, of course, and we all make mistakes along the way. But running our actions through this filter of love, pausing to reflect upon whether what we do demonstrably aligns with loving God or loving neighbor, draws us ever closer to the Kingdom.

And note that this whole love God, love neighbor thing is known as the *Greatest Commandment*. It's not the greatest suggestion. It's not the greatest recommendation. We are literally *commanded* to love God and neighbor. Not only when it's convenient or when it suits us or when people agree with us. But always and everywhere and at all times.

Today we mark Stewardship Sunday at St. John's. For many of you, this won't come as a particular surprise. Each fall we invite financial pledges from parishioners for the coming year. In practical terms, this is how we formulate the budget, and it is only through your generosity that we are able to fund the programs and ministries that make St. John's the special community that it continues to be.

Now, after doing online church for 62 straight weeks, and continuing to live-stream our services, and all the while jokingly referring to myself as a televangelist, I know talking about money may be a slippery slope. I promise there won't be a 900-number flashing on the screen. But the reason I love this topic is that it ultimately encourages us to think deeply about what matters to us. Yes, the church needs money in order to pay staff and run programs and keep our sacred space in order. And, to be clear, it specifically, needs *your* money.

But here at St. John's, 'What matters to you' is a question of faith. It's a question of contributing to a community that does all in its power to support and grow and sustain your life in Jesus Christ. A question of turning the command to love God and love neighbor into tangible practices that help transform our selves, our community, and our world.

You can't put a price tag on that, of course. But I do invite you to reflect and pray and think deeply about your 2022 pledge to this parish. In this moment, and over the past year and a half, we have collectively seen how St. John's has impacted our lives through community, connection, and compassion. In the days ahead, I encourage you to think about the ways in which these three C's of community, connection, and compassion, impact your own life and relationship with the church.

If you're renewing a pledge, perhaps you can give a bit more this year, as our expenses continue to rise. Or if you're new to this community or haven't pledged before, perhaps you would be willing to walk with us on this journey in a way that drives a stake into the ground and proclaims that you are committed to this place. In either case, sharing your financial resources with the church tells the world that St. John's matters to you. And that it makes a difference in your life.

Amid this environment of differing opinions and division, we are unified by faith and common prayer. That's one reason why a vibrant and thriving St. John's matters. God doesn't call us together to agree with one another on every single issue. The Spirit often works through the diversity of opinion. But God calls us together as a church to make a difference in the world. To heal what is broken. To set our minds, as Jesus says to Peter, on divine things not human things. To build relationships with one another, not by engaging in small talk, but by engaging the real and difficult topics that matter.

The church can and should be a place of common ground where people can come not to be judged, but to enter into open and honest dialogue, to model honest and authentic relationship. Sometimes we need the church to be a safe space where we can find comfort and solace, and escape conflict and strife. At others we need it to be a place of challenge that pushes us beyond our comfort zones into new ways of thinking and being.

None of this is easy but, with God's help, it is possible. And with *your* help, St. John's will continue to be that place in the year ahead and for generations to come.