

The Greatest Commandment
Matthew 22: 34-46; Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17; I Thes. 2: 1-8

It's been a long campaign season. We should be used to incidents like this - people trying to trip up the opponent with trick questions. Well, we can't even get away from it even in the bible – can we?

But before we tackle today's story, let's once again take a step back. I have been following the lectionary the past number of messages and concentrating on gospel passages from Matthew. Mostly we have heard Jesus telling parables about the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God. We end up with lessons like:

- The first shall be last and the last shall be first.
- It is better to actually do the work than to have the right beliefs about the work.
- The great banquet is prepared and all are invited.

These parables and lessons are good news for many of those who are following Jesus, for the disciples and others in the large crowds that surround Jesus. But these are not comforting parables or visions for the Pharisees and Sadducees. Part of the time they don't understand what Jesus is talking about. When they do understand, they don't like what they hear.

The establishment (in this case the religious leaders) is not big on being dissed in public. To save face the Pharisees and Sadducees try to get back at Jesus. We didn't get to these readings, but you probably remember the stories. Earlier in Matthew 22, the Pharisees try out some trick questions on Jesus. Is it lawful for Jews to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor? And Jesus has that great comeback line that we are still fond of quoting: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesars' and to God what is God's."

With the Pharisees unable to trap Jesus, the Sadducees take a turn. They try a question about resurrection and marriage. You remember this legal quandary: a married man dies before he has children. He leaves no one to inherit his land or to take care of his wife. According to custom his wife marries his brother, but then the brother dies so she marries the next brother. And the brothers keep dying, and she keeps marrying until she has married all seven brothers. The religious law needs to deal with this dilemma - at the resurrection, whose wife will she be?

Once again Jesus sees through the question to the heart of the matter: there is no need for marriage in heaven and besides, our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel is the God of the living, not the dead!

The crowd is astounded at how Jesus deals with this trickery. The Pharisees and Sadducees have been unable to stump him - to expose Jesus for the fraud they believe him to be. So together they try one more time. They bring out the big guns so to speak, their best legal scholar who will surely trip him up. The text says this is a lawyer, which sounds strange to our ears.

But this is not a secular lawyer. This is more akin to a canon lawyer like we might find in the Catholic Church. This lawyer knows all 613 Jewish laws - the 365 that are negative commands (one for each day of the year) and the 248 that are positive commands (one for each part of the body). Clearly Jesus knows the law but does he know the greatest law? The lawyer asks, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus doesn't hesitate. He knows the Law as well as those who would be pleased to see him fail. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. That is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'.

Jesus is not making this stuff up. He is quoting from Deut. 6:5. The greatest law is the Shema, the law that is recited every day, several times a day. "Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength".

And the second is from Leviticus 19:18. "Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." The second is a bit more obscure perhaps, but combined they have a power that leaves the Pharisees and Sadducees speechless.

In joining these two commandments, in making them equal, Jesus doesn't just say this is the greatest commandment. He says that the 611 other laws and the teachings of the prophets hang on these two. They are all interpreted through this great double law.

Presumably, this shuts up the religious authorities long enough for Jesus to ask his own trick question of them. "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?"

This question may seem ridiculous to us. I don't really get the question or even the importance of the question. But for Jews of course, this is very significant, understanding the Messiah. And it is an easy answer that everyone knows; the Messiah is the son of David. But instead of praising them for knowing the right answer, Jesus quotes from what would be a very familiar Psalm 110:1. "The Lord says to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'"

Jesus reasons that if it is David who calls the Messiah Lord then how can it be his son? It is all so confusing to them, quoting from a well-known passage they recite in worship. From that day on there are no more trick questions, and according to Matthew, Jesus doesn't even talk to the Pharisees anymore.

So what are we to make of all this? Is Jesus stooping to their level, playing silly legalistic games? Or is Jesus' point different altogether? Perhaps, as Anthony Robinson, United Church of Christ theologian, pastor, and author says, "as with riddles and parables, the real point has something to do with different ways of knowing. Maybe Jesus is saying that the important thing is not so much having the right answer as changing direction or orientation." Jesus points us all in a new direction, to love instead of law.

So, what is this God that we are to love with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength? Perhaps this God that we love is so mysterious that we can never be quite sure what it is. We are given hints throughout the parables as to the nature of God. Jesus tells us about the reign of God, the banquet, the vineyard, the mustard seed, the shepherd, the woman who searches for the lost coin. But in the words of St. Gregory of Nyssa, "Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything."

So to really love must we grasp not to what is known, but wonder at what gives us hints about God? We need not look far to be in awe:

blue sky,

yellow, orange, red, green, brown trees,

crackling leaves,

geese in flight,

scurrying squirrels,

roses still in bloom,

water flowing in gutters, rivers and streams,

the vigorous wind,

and then there are the little things like atoms and cells and bacterium ... We might wonder at the beauty of humans, made in God's image,

the laughter of children,

the diversity of bodies,

the tall, short, wide, thin,

many skin tones and nose and chin shapes.

I read a Mennonite theologian recently, can't remember the name, who made a big case for this being the Double Love Command with the first and most important love being for God. Perhaps, but some of us need to start with the more concrete as was just named. The beauty of this commandment, as Jesus gives it to us, is that we can start at either end, with love of God or love of neighbor and, theoretically at least, we get to the other side. If we truly love our neighbor, we begin to get a glimpse of the mystery of God. And if we truly live into the mystery, how can we not love our neighbor?

So we love the mystery that is God and we love the more intimately known, our neighbor and our self, and through this lens of love we interpret the rest of the law and the prophets. Is it that simple? When the issue of the greatest commandment appears in Luke an additional trick question is asked: Who is my neighbor? And Jesus tells the story of the merchant who goes down to Jericho, but is attacked by thieves. And the punch line is that the only one to help the merchant is a Samaritan. Those listening would never think of a Samaritan as good, only as misdirected and unfaithful. The Samaritan turns out to be not only the good neighbor, but the one who upholds the law to love God and neighbor.

Several years ago, I learned of a Quaker ministry bringing healing to soldiers returning from war. Soldiers are not people I ordinarily think of as neighbors or ones who uphold the love of God. As a person committed to peace, I have drawn pretty strict boundaries around what I think it means to be a peacemaker, a neighbor. This is not an area where I have been open to mystery.

But here was a group of practitioners committed to peace that have been providing a healing massage, reiki, and acupuncture to soldiers and their caregivers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center for several years. These massage therapists and acupuncturists have taken a risk to cross into unfamiliar territory, a military hospital. They have taken a risk to love their neighbors as themselves and it has been transformative for them as well as for those receiving the treatment. The wounds of war are being healed. Walls of separation are being broken down. A new kind of peace is being built. If loving my neighbor as myself leads me to new understandings of the mystery of God, to new understandings of neighbor and to new understandings of self, no wonder Jesus said that the rest of the Law and prophets hang on this great commandment. If we can get this right, there may just be hope for changing the world. No wonder we want to - no wonder we have to - share this good news. Of course it would be much easier to take one law at a time and interpret that. Just letting them all hang out to dry separately. This is not uncommon in our country, in our world. But Jesus says if we start here, if we can get these two intertwined laws right, then all the other laws and the teachings of the prophets begin to fall into place.

Does it sound simple yet? It is of course much bigger than it sounds. And it is a tender and delicate balance we are called to live into, between loving God that is mystery and loving the neighbor (as we love ourselves). It is put this way in I Thessalonians:

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

And from Deuteronomy 6:4-7:

Hear, O Israel, Hear O Hatfield, The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (And love your neighbor as yourself.) These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children and repeat them constantly.

May we live the great commandment, calling each other and others to this great truth.

Amen.

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