

Pentecost 24 Year A 2008

Proper 25

Texts: Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

I Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Matthew 22:37-40

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

In this morning’s Gospel, we are coming to the end of the discussions between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel. For the last month we have been listening in as the Pharisees and Sadducees question Jesus and his authority. There has been mounting tension and anger on their part as he exposes them for the hard-hearted and misguided groups that they are. Jesus has told parable after parable about the extravagant mercy and forgiveness of God and contrasted that with the rigidity and smugness that the religious elite have shown to their fellow Jews. They don’t get Jesus’ message of what true discipleship is and how to believe in him is to believe in God. They don’t get that the kingdom of God will include all those they would love to exclude for any number of reasons.

Time after time, test after test, they attempt to trap Jesus only to have him turn their words back on them. The Sadducees wanted to trap him and asked him a question about the resurrection, something that they did not believe in. If a man should die and his wife is childless and, as custom would have it she marries her husband’s brother, in heaven whose wife would see be? They then take this to ridiculous lengths and take it out as far as the man having seven brothers; all of them marrying her after the others die leaving her childless. They were not interested in the question they asked, they were interested in seeing if they could best Jesus, get him to slip up and thereby prove themselves correct.

In last week’s gospel the Pharisees, seeing how he put the Sadducees in their place try the same thing. “Teacher,” they say, “we know that you

are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" They think they have Jesus over a barrel. If Jesus answers "yes" he is committing blasphemy. If Jesus answers "no" he is committing treason. I can just imagine the Pharisee's thinking with a gleam in their eye, "WOW! We got him now! And not only did we get the best of Jesus, by getting the best of Jesus we got the best of the Sadducees as well!" This was a twofer! The Pharisees could put both Jesus and their brother Jews who they did not agree with in their places at the same time!

The problem with the Pharisees was that although they say that they know that Jesus is sincere, they very obviously aren't. Jesus sees through their little ruse and tells them to bring him a coin. "Whose head is on this coin?" he asks them. "The Emperor's" they say. "Well," says Jesus, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

That brings us to today's gospel reading. Not satisfied that they haven't gotten Jesus to slip up, they try again. You have to give the Pharisees points for being persistent. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" they ask. The Jews had 613 commandments to try and uphold. 248 of the commandments were positive (a number believe to correspond to the number of body parts), and 365 commandments were negative commands (a number equaling the number of days in a year). The thinking back then was that all 613 commandments were equally binding, that no one had the right, the insight, the hubris, to prioritize God's law; only God to do that.¹ So, if Jesus does elevate one commandment over another he is either proud and arrogant or just plain wrong.

What the Pharisees neglected to see as an option however was that, if only God could prioritize God's law, perhaps the one man in front of them to whom they address the question really is God himself!

Jesus says to them "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your

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neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Rather than Jesus elevating just one commandment as the greatest, he gives them two and the two he gives them are absolutely inseparable. As Martin Luther, the great 16th century Reformation theologian, wrote “if either of these fall it pulls the other with it; while on the other hand, wherever the one remains steadfast and is faithfully put into practice, it brings the other with it.”²

In other words, if you don’t do one you can’t do the other, and if you do one, the other will naturally follow. You cannot love God without living that love out in service to your neighbor, and in honoring your neighbor you honor God.

I have said from this pulpit before that love is NOT a feeling or an emotion, but an action; it is not a noun but a verb. Love is not something you profess, it is something you do. It is the external sign of a life lived in faith.

Whenever I think, “but how can I do that? How can I love my neighbor, my neighbor who might be my enemy?”, I think back to another reformer, this time a reformer in the 20th century also named Martin Luther. I think back to the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who wrote, “I am so glad God has commanded that I love my enemies. Loving them is so much easier than liking them!”

Love being an action does not require that I have warm fuzzy feelings about people. Love does require that I be open to them, that I try and meet their needs, that I treat them as God would have me treat them. In doing that I show my love for God.

What’s more, God does not ask a half-hearted attempt from me, he asks for my all. “You shall love the Lord your God with ALL your heart, and with ALL your soul, and with ALL your mind.” Everything I do, all of my actions, all of my life, spiritual as well as physical, all my intellect and thoughts are to be oriented towards God. That orientation will by definition take me in the direction of my neighbor.

² <http://web.archive.org/web/20030201222927/www.markers.com/ink/mlawgospel.htm>

There is a poem that summarizes what I have been talking about. I do not know the author but I do know that he or she was a person who understood the Great Commandment. “I sought my soul, and the soul I could not see. I sought my God and God eluded me-I sought my neighbor and found all three.”

It is so much easier to love the God I don’t see than to love the neighbor I do see. But Jesus doesn’t let anyone of us off the hook. Jesus tells us that both are required, even when looking at the neighbor is painful, even when dealing with that person is trying and difficult, even when that neighbor is an enemy. Jesus tells us that we only love God as much as we love the person we love the least.³

This interchange between Jesus and the Pharisees occurs in the week preceding his death. Jesus was about to give the world the biggest sign of the Great Commandment that history has ever known. Jesus was about to die for his friends and his enemies, with his arms stretched out on the hard wood of the cross.

The cross, the most sacred of Christian symbols is a visual reminder of the Great Commandment. The cross is made up of a vertical bar pointing upwards, pointing to Jesus’ love of God, and a horizontal bar pointing to Jesus’ love of humanity.⁴ Whenever we see it may we be reminded of the dual dimension of what we are commanded to do as Christians. May we be reminded and spurred on to action in learning to love God with all our hearts and all our souls, and all our minds, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Amen.

³ Dorothy Day as quoted in *Sermon Nuggets* by Lindy Black Pentecost 24 2008

⁴ Edward Marquart, www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_the_hingeGA.htm

