

“First Things First”

A friend from Ohio E-mailed me this week about how tired she is of things political: commercials, junk mail, E-mails and phone calls. I almost laughed out loud. In Iowa we've been at this so long—since early 2007—that I can scarcely imagine the precious silence to come.

So maybe I just have politics on the brain these days; but the scene described in Matthew 22 seems disarmingly familiar. Somebody who is informed, intelligent and clever—let's say a reporter—poses a series of carefully worded questions to a public figure with the hope of exposing something sensational. These are not really the “I want to know” type of questions; they're “gotcha” questions, the kind to which alert candidates almost invariably give vague and unrevealing answers.

In the case of Matthew 22 the clever questioners are Sadducees and Pharisees. Both groups want to discredit Jesus. It's Holy Week. Jesus has made his triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem via an impressive parade that we commemorate each year at Palm Sunday. Crowds have proclaimed Jesus “Son of David,” hailing him as the promised Messiah. The Sadducees are particularly concerned that Jesus will stir up unrest and cause the Romans to intervene with force. The Pharisees are concerned that Jesus will draw people away from their interpretations of the teachings of Moses. Usually these two groups, Sadducees and Pharisees, are somewhat at odds with one another. But for the moment they are united in their opposition to Jesus. They remind me of what Janet Davis used to say about musicians: “The only thing two musicians can agree upon is the incompetence of a third.” I assure you the same principle pertains in theological disputes.

The Sadducees and Pharisees genuinely think Jesus is dangerous. They want to unmask him as a pretender, an imposter, as the threat to the nation and to the faith that they believe him to be. They are disturbed by his following and want to bring him down, which they could do in a variety of ways. They could get Jesus to say something that makes it seem as though he does not know or respect the traditions of their forebears; or they could get him to say something that sounds as though he supports the Roman military occupation of Israel, which would alienate the rabble that are fawning after him; or they could get him to speak treason against Rome. Any of these things would help their cause. They want Jesus to condemn himself with his own words, to give them a pretext to do away with him. They make several runs at it.

The Pharisees with their pals the Herodians try first, with a question designed to make Jesus seem either like an agent of Rome or like a political subversive: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” You remember his response. He asks for a coin with Augustus's beaming countenance on it and says, “Give to the emperor what is the emperor's, and give to God what is God's.” And what belongs to God? The full answer to that comes in a moment.

Next the Sadducees take their turn at bat with an involved and actually rather silly hypothetical question about a widow who in succession marries six brothers who all die—she must have been quite a cook. The question is, whose wife will she be in heaven? The answer amounts to something my Dad used to say: “Ask a silly question, get a silly answer.”

So the Pharisees, the experts in the religious law, huddle up to take one last try. And one of them comes out with this question: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

They’re really mocking Jesus with the title “Teacher.” They don’t acknowledge his authority to teach them. And they don’t really expect a meaningful answer. There are 613 laws in the Torah. To the Pharisees each one was important, and commentary on laws usually consisted of elaborating on them, not summarizing them. To ask which is the “greatest” (the Greek word is “mega”) is probably to try to get him to say that some of God’s commandments don’t matter. Imagine what John Stewart will do with that sound byte on the Daily Show. This is nasty stuff.

But Jesus’ answer is ingenious, largely because—as is evident from Jesus’ life and teaching—it comes without calculation and from a place deep in his heart. He has thought and prayed about this very issue. Jesus draws on two elements of tradition, Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Leviticus 19:18b to reply, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first 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.”

The answer is clear and substantive: love is the guiding principle of the law. The law is intended to help us love God with all that we are, heart, soul and mind—and this, by the way, is the final answer to what it is that belongs to God as opposed to the Emperor. What is God’s? Everything! And, Jesus continues, loving ourselves and our neighbors is a part of what it means to love God, inseparable from loving God. By saying that “all the law and the prophets” hang on this principle, Jesus is not only upholding the law, but expanding it to include the prophetic tradition with its insistent calls for systemic justice. And Jesus says that all of it collapses like a house of cards without the clear, simple, enduring principle of love.

Love is the central purpose of the law and the prophets. It is our central calling as human beings. It is the mega-law, without which the rest of it becomes a tangle of meaningless verbiage. Jesus doesn’t make this up out of nothing. He clarifies and elucidates the central tradition of his people and universalizes it. This “gotcha” question receives a straightforward response that is incredibly and eternally profound.

Let’s be clear: love in this context does not mean warm, fuzzy feelings. That is sentimentality. Love is an act of the will. Love, in Frederick Buechner’s concise definition, is “the deliberate seeking of the well-being of another, even at the expense of self.” This is the kind of love that Jesus taught. It is the kind of love he lived. It is the kind of love to which he calls us as his followers, because this kind of love is the clearest and truest revelation of the nature of God. It is absolutely central to our faith. If someone

who had never heard of Christianity asked me what our faith is about, this is precisely where I would begin my answer.

All three synoptic gospels record this saying of Jesus, and the Gospel According to John, too, is filled with exhortations to this kind of love. Each of the four gospels frames this love talk a little differently. But the likelihood is overwhelming that if Jesus ever said anything he said this.

Matthew, our gospel for this year, follows up the saying with an exchange regarding the Messiah, and specifically whether the authority of the Messiah exceeds the authority of King David. Does the authority of the Messiah stem from being David's son, David's descendant? The answer, derived from Psalm 110, is that even King David addressed the Messiah as "Lord." So the authority of the Messiah is not derivative, it is primary. This puts an end to the questioning. Jesus is not to be judged by the tradition; he claims authority to interpret the tradition. Hence in Matthew the recurrence of phrases such as, "you have heard it said... but I say to you."

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and your neighbor as yourself." Can it really be that simple?

Many years ago our son Jonathan was the only member of a Confirmation class of fifty-two who chose not to be confirmed. He wasn't trying to stick it to Mom and Dad. His written decision was remarkably mature, citing the obvious fact that he was only thirteen and felt too young to make such a life-shaping decision. We were proud of him and supported his choice, recognizing that it was not a repudiation of church. We expressed the expectation that he would continue to attend worship each week, which he agreed to do... for a while.

But a couple of years later church attendance became a sticking point, and we had a pretty intense discussion about it. In exasperation he said, "God loves you so love each other, God loves you so love each other, God loves you so love each other... I get it, already!" He was right: he did get it. If you have to sum the whole thing up in a sentence, that's a pretty good sentence.

Love God and neighbor: can it really be that simple? Yes.

And the simplicity yields a clarity that can give us tremendous energy, when all our efforts are aligned. "Love of God and neighbor" becomes the lens through which everything we do is assessed. Many years ago H. Richard Niebhuur wrote a little book entitled, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*.¹ He was trying to state succinctly what the church is all about. He concluded what sounds obvious when we hear it said out loud: "the purpose of the church is to increase the love of God and neighbor." And the purpose of the ministry is to "edify" the church, to strengthen it for the fulfillment of this mission. It's that simple.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and your neighbor as yourself." Can it really be that demanding? Yes. By growing in love of God and neighbor we fulfill our purpose as human beings created in the image of God who is love.

¹ New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956.

Our Plymouth motto acknowledges this. It begins, “We agree to differ,” and all of us like that part, especially if we have found our way here from traditions that were intent on telling us very precisely what we were to think and what rules we were to follow. We resonate with the concept of thinking for ourselves, and prize a faith community where there is room for many different perspectives.

But the motto goes on immediately to affirm, “We resolve to love.” We resolve to love because this is the unchanging essence of our faith. When we’re disagreeing, it is to be a disagreement about what love demands, what love requires, how we formulate our best understandings of what we are to be about.

And all the while we’re at it, we unite to serve; because we’re not going to wait to settle all differences before we serve the world in love. We’ll always be trying to deepen our understanding of how best to love. But in the meantime we’ll act on the best understanding we have. “We agree to differ. We resolve to love. We unite to serve.” So the conversation never ends. The journey is never complete. But our reason for being is love.

And this means loving God with all that we have and are and can ever hope to become. Between now and Thanksgiving we will each be asked to consider very specifically how love of God and neighbor is reflected in our use of the resources God has entrusted to us. We will be asked to consider the place of giving in our lives, and to make our commitments to one another and to God for the financial support of the life and ministries of Plymouth Church during the coming year.

In one sense this is a terrible time to be making commitments for the future. Every day headlines proclaim the uncertainties of tomorrow. But, honestly, what better time could there be for us to consider the blessings we have received and the opportunities to align our lives with the purposes of this community of faith? That’s what giving means: aligning our lives with the purposes of love. This journey of generosity is one dimension of our growth in love of God and neighbor.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and your neighbor as yourself.”

It is that simple... and that demanding.

Amen

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