

October 23, 2011 ~ 19th Sunday after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12; Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8; **Matthew 22: 34-46**

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. *"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"*

He said to him, *"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."*

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: *"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?"*

They said to him, *"The son of David."*

He said to them, *"How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"*

No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

A TWO-PART WAY OF LIFE

I watched this science fiction program one time that had the typical plot outline of aliens coming to earth and giving the people of earth a period of time to accomplish a task or the entire human population would be wiped out. In this particular show the humans perceived the task to be resolving the conflict in the world and they set out with a vengeance to bring about the world-wide prosperity, peace and harmony that has eluded humanity since the beginning of time. When the deadline approached world leaders met with the aliens believing that they had done what was expected and that the aliens would spare them. Unfortunately the aliens in this scenario were not so inclined – their intention had been for one power in the human world to take over and subdue everyone else – to vanquish rather than reconcile.

There is a scripture text that is similarly misunderstood: *Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.* Does the consummation of the divine project in which "all things are reconciled" to God mean that the foes are suppressed and beaten down or that all things are made whole and brought into their proper place? According to the gospel understanding – according to Jesus – they are not squashed but made friends.

When we can see this understanding of the passage Jesus quotes, we are prepared to come to grips with today's message from Matthew's gospel in its entirety rather than leaving off the second segment as being too confusing in favour of the first piece

which we like because it is about love. While it is tempting to separate the passage into two parts – the lawyer’s question and Jesus’ answer as part one – Jesus’ question that seems impossible to answer as part two – there is the possibility that the answer to part two is the same as the answer to part one.

Jesus asks them: *How can the Messiah be David’s son? How can David call his own son Lord?* What kind of saviour is subject to someone else’s authority? A saviour who loves God with heart and soul and mind – a saviour who loves neighbour as self that’s who. A saviour intent upon the reconciliation of all – the wholeness of all – submits to the authority enabling and ensuring that the well-being of everyone is taken into consideration, even the competition.

The competition – in this case the Pharisees – asks Jesus: *Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?* It is an ethical challenge to which Jesus responds, not with witty repartee, a new theory, or political correctness – he simply quotes scripture that any Jew then or now could likely recite: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind* – from Deuteronomy 6:5, part of the prayer known as the “Shema” in Jewish tradition. And this is followed by: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* – from a whole series of laws found in Leviticus 19.

Loving God is the first thing, the most important thing. And to love God means that you also love others. The ancient rabbis put it in similar terms: *What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Law.* We might know it better as “the Golden Rule” which instead of the word love says “do” – *Do unto others...*

The key problem in interpreting this double commandment – this two-part way of life – for us is that we don’t really “get” the biblical meaning of love. We are prone to think of love and spirituality as interior things – as emotion. Our spirituality is often thought of as believing or feeling a certain way about God, about others and about ourselves. We understand love as an emotion and too often as a passive response to something beyond our control. After all, we can’t control our feelings can we?

Language changes over time as does our use of it – in the first century Mediterranean world – the biblical context – love is not about warm feelings but about a pattern of action – a choice – a behavioural response.

To love God with all one’s heart, and soul, and mind, is to choose to respond to God even as God chooses to love us. Feelings and emotions do not enter into the equation. It refers to what can be called loving-kindness – not passive emotion, but active mercy marked by patience and generosity.

To really grasp what is being conveyed in this passage we need to replace all the cultural clichés we have about love with a biblical understanding of love. To love God with all our heart, mind, and soul seems nearly impossible when we think of love as an emotion. How does one conjure up feelings for the divine – for the mysterious, disembodied concept of God? We cannot look into God’s eyes, wrap our arms around the Spirit, or even see the face of Jesus.

Likewise, loving our neighbor is difficult. If love is merely our passive response to the people we encounter, we may be as likely to be repulsed as we are moved to love. How can one legitimately look into the face of an enemy and feel unqualified love? It is nearly impossible.

But, biblical love is not passive. It is not something that occurs to us without our control or will. Biblical love is something we do. It is loving-kindness – merciful action that is both generous and continuous. When Jesus says “love your neighbor as yourself,” he is saying, “treat all those around you as you would your own flesh and blood” – as sisters and brothers in one family, deserving of equal honor and special care. To love the neighbor as one’s self is to make a conscious choice and act upon it – to treat people with respect and enact, rather than merely profess, compassion.

Serving God with our heart, soul, and mind means that we are called to bring everything we’ve got – our voice and our political power as well as our financial resources – to bear in living out God’s mission of reconciliation and redemption for the world.

These days the temptation seems especially strong for churches – for Christians – to reduce the gospel to one point – some would say the more specific the better – the better for use as a precise litmus test – either you are in or you’re out. In this Sunday’s gospel, Jesus is given a wide-open invitation to do the same – and he declines. Asked what one commandment is most important, he gives two – and not just any two. The two commandments he gives demand nothing less than heart, soul, and mind – every part of a person capable of valuing something – and that those capacities be devoted to God and to neighbor – to everyone if I understand Jesus’ teaching in the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* correctly.

Being Christian is about loving God and loving what God loves. Loving God, of course, that’s the central point of our gospel reading from this morning. And in addition to loving God, we are to love what God loves. When we love God what God loves, we always, and at the same time love God. They are inseparable. And what does God love? John 3:16, provides the answer: *For God so loved the world...* God loves the world – not just me – not just you and me – not just Christians – not even just human beings – the whole of creation.

I read somewhere that the way to tell if something is Christian is to ask whether it promotes the flourishing of all creation. If not, it may be expedient and satisfying, but it’s not Christian – not what Jesus calls forth from us.

The greatest commandment as far as Jesus is concerned recognizes God’s passion for the world – a world that God is loving into transformation so that all are made whole. We participate in God’s passion – love God – as we participate in God’s love of the world – promote the flourishing of all creation. It is what I am calling a two-part way of life: love God – change the world. It’s as simple and as challenging as that. **Amen**

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh