

FIRST LESSON: Deuteronomy 6: 4-5; Leviticus 19:18
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 22: 34-47
October 25, 2020

“The Trouble with Questions is the Answers”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

If a lawyer wrote the Lord’s Prayer it might go something like this: “Our Father, who shall be termed party of the first part, whose place of business is in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom, pursuant to terms and conditions, come. Thy will, duly uncontested, be done on earth, inasfar as existing statutes permit, as it is in Heaven. Give us this twenty-fifth day of October, 2020, our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, notwithstanding claims, liens and legal costs, as we, who shall be termed party of the second part, forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, that we might not commit acts in violation of moral, civil or criminal law, but deliver us from evil, the nature of which shall be determined by the court. For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and, pending appeal, the Glory forever. Amen.

The educated classes among the Greeks argued about philosophy. For the Romans, it was all about investments, making money, and staying on the right side of those in power. For the Jews the discussions always centered around the Law. The Old Testament has 613 commandments. Common sense might tell us that some laws are more important than others, but that is not written down anywhere. Arguing positions of the law was a favorite Jewish pastime. In some circles it still is.

It was a lawyer who approached Jesus. This particular man wasn’t a novice. We’re told he was an expert in the law. And the question he asked Jesus was one that was often debated. “Teacher,” he said, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Some rabbis spoke of commandments as “heavy” and others as “light” as a means of distinguishing them. The ten commandments would be “heavy.” The dietary commands would be “light”.

Jesus went right to the heart of the matter by quoting what is known as the Shema, which says to: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Interestingly Jesus changes the last word “strength” to “mind” but probably what is being referred to is mental strength or will. This would have been a well-received answer. We are to love God without limits or qualifications—with our whole beings. But then Jesus actually continues and answers a question not asked. He says, And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets,” he added, “hang on these two commandments.”

One of the authors I read this week had what I thought was a lovely image to describe all the law and prophets hanging on these two

commandments. A door has two hinges, upper and lower. If one of the hinges is lost, the door hangs off. It's completely unstable. It can be closed only with great care and holding on to the whole thing. But when both hinges are in place the door can open and shut with ease. It works perfectly. If we try just one of these two commandments—either loving God or loving one another, we'll become unhinged. Stability comes when both work together. 1 John 4:20 puts it another way saying: "If a man says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who doesn't love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"

The issue, of course, is love. I know I have said this before, but our understanding of love and the type of love referred to here are not the same thing. We're individualistic for starters, and that would have made no sense to these people. They thought of their identity in terms of tribe, location and family group. In some ways we get this. A Phillies fan or an Eagles fan would get this. Some people have a strong sense of identity with a team, their neighborhood or their extended family. To "love" in this sense is to be attached to the group. It is to belong. To "hate" is to detach from the group. This is really what Jesus meant when he said we must "hate" our families. We are not actually supposed to hate them! It is a way of saying that our primary attachment should be to God. To "love" God with all our heart, soul and mind is to be totally attached to God. And to love one's neighbor in this way is to be attached to our neighbor and committed to their welfare, recognizing that we need each other.

Understanding this may make it a little bit easier for us to grasp what is being said. To love is to belong. Even if we acknowledge this and realize that agape love is a pure benevolent form of love, however, if we still think of it in emotional terms it's pretty hard to actually do. We can't "produce" this love on our own, because in many ways we have a passive understanding of love. Love is something that happens to us. We love chocolate. We love puppies and kittens. We fall in love. This passivity can be very dangerous, because we can actually use it to excuse our own actions, including marital infidelity, on the basis of "we fell in love." Our culture thinks of love as an intense emotion that overtakes us. But biblical love is not passive, and it is not always emotional. It is an active response and a choice. To love God with all our heart, soul and mind does not mean we have to somehow manufacture a whole set of warm, fuzzy feelings for God and obsess over God like we would obsess over a new love interest. If we knew Jesus personally in a human context, we might be able to think of him this way, but we are being called to love a God who is intangible.

Many Christians secretly feel like spiritual failures because they are not overwhelmed with loving feelings when they think of God. We've been told that we are supposed to love God. We hear about it all the time. We try and try to create these feelings and it's like slogging uphill. But emotion is fickle. Emotion depends upon how much sleep we've had. Emotion depends upon our body chemistry. And how we experience emotion can also be damaged by trauma. God does not judge us on such a fleeting thing as emotion. God looks at our

actions and decisions. Do we put God first? Do we treat our neighbor as we would want to be treated? Loving is actually a choice, not a feeling. This is great news, because it means we can love someone we don't even like, simply by treating them the right way.

The lawyers who questioned Jesus may or may not have really been interested in the answer he gave. The scripture says they were "testing" him. Jesus would have understood the motivation. So, after giving them his answer, he proceeded to serve them one up in return. But Jesus' question was really difficult. It was probably one that had not even ever thought of before. It began simply enough: "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?"

They answered, "The son of David." They probably thought that was obvious. But then Jesus quoted Psalm 110 and said, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says,

"The Lord said to my Lord:

"Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet."

If then David calls him 'Lord,'" said Jesus, "how can he be his son?"

In the Hebrew scriptures the verse reads, "Yahweh said to my Lord." Later convention believed God's name was too holy to speak or write and substituted the word "Lord." But "Yahweh (or the Lord) said to my Lord" could be like saying, "God said to God." If the second Lord is the Messiah, he is not just David's son, he is also David's Lord.

All of this might seem like splitting hairs to us, but it is an indirect way of Jesus stating that the Messiah is more than an ordinary human being. God's plan was much larger than that. These Pharisees would have no doubt spent hours debating and discussing the Messiah and his relationship to David, but the passage Jesus quoted was one they never thought of. They were stumped. And when they walked away, no one dared ask any more questions.

The trouble with questions is the answers. We may ask a question we really don't want the answer to. Like the Pharisees, it's just an excuse for something else, and then find ourselves handed some unexpectedly deep answers. Or we ourselves might be asked things that cause us to think outside of our assumptions. But one thing we should never be afraid of is the truth. Questions do not have to be feared when the answers are found in the unfathomable depths of God, the one whose greatest command is love. Amen.

Deuteronomy 6: 4-5

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Leviticus 19:18

¹⁸ "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

Matthew 22: 34-47

³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

³⁷ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”^[a] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’^[b] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Whose Son Is the Messiah?
⁴¹ While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them,⁴² “What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?”

“The son of David,” they replied.

⁴³ He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says,

⁴⁴ “The Lord said to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet.”^[c]

⁴⁵ If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” ⁴⁶ No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.