

Matthew 22:34-40 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37 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.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

THE TEST OF A LAWYER

This week the testing of Jesus continues. In last week’s lesson it was the Pharisees and the Herodians who tested Jesus. In this week’s lesson it is the Pharisees and the lawyers! You knew that had to happen. If you want to cause trouble bring in the lawyers!

Now don’t misunderstand. I’m not making a comment about all lawyers. Many of my best friends have been lawyers, and the Presbyterian Church boasts quite a few prominent people who are both ministers and lawyers. I think even John Calvin studied law before he studied theology.

But, some lawyers (not our lawyers but those “other” lawyers) in an effort to win their case ask questions not to get at the truth but to get a certain answer. They ask trick questions.

And so it is with this lawyer. He wants to trick Jesus with a question about the law. Actually the word is translated by the NRSV of the Bible as “test.” The word could also be translated “tempt.”

I wondered. What could be the trick to this question? How could the lawyer tempt Jesus with such a straightforward, simple question?

Every morning the devout Jew got up and gave the answer to this question. Loving God with all your heart, soul and mind was at the center of the faith. If this was a test it surely didn’t seem like a very good one. How could Jesus be trapped with such a simple question?

It would be like asking someone who attended church all the time or a minister to recite the Apostle’s Creed. That shouldn’t be a hard test, and it certainly wasn’t a very hard test for one who is a Rabbi, a teacher.

THE TEST OF DOING GOD’S WILL

Maybe the temptation, the trick in this question is not in what Jesus is required to say. Many Rabbis before Jesus said that love of God and love of neighbor are two sides of the same coin.

Maybe the temptation is to give the right answer without giving the right action.

Maybe the temptation is to talk about loving God and neighbor and then throwing in so many qualifications on who we can love that the statement is essentially meaningless. Yes, we should love our neighbor, but we shouldn't define neighbor in too broad a way.

We can blithely talk about loving God and neighbor and then do nothing about it. But, Jesus didn't do that.

Soon the Matthew's gospel will tell the most dramatic story of love that the world has ever heard. Jesus will show the love and forgiveness of God, and the love of neighbor in one dramatic moment on the cross.

"Father forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." The test of the lawyer is passed. And those of us who would be the disciples of Jesus are given the same bar exam.

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Can we dare to do what we believe? Can we dare to pair these two commandments? Can we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind, and love our neighbor as our self?

The lawyer got one thing right. He didn't ask, "What is the greatest belief?" The lawyer asked, "What is the greatest commandment?"

In this season of theological controversy in the church, there has been much talk about our beliefs. What are the core beliefs of our faith? What beliefs do we have to hold in order to be a Christian? What beliefs do we have to hold in order to be Presbyterian? What are the fundamentals of the faith?

Actually this is not a new controversy. It goes back to the founding of the Presbyterian Church during the Revolutionary War period. They said that the essential tenets of the faith were contained in the Confession, but they didn't define those essentials.

It was a compromise in a time of theological controversy. But, it was not very effective. The church continued to be divided over basic beliefs.

And this struggle to express what we believe came up again in the early part of the 20th century. As you might imagine it was the Presbyterians who muddied the water. Some ministers in New York suggested that they were not sure about the doctrine of the virgin birth. They were admitted into the Presbytery anyway, and this led to a church wide controversy over the essential tenants of the faith.

The result of that controversy was the fundamentalist/ modernist debate. Once again some in the church developed a litmus test for orthodoxy. Believe these five things, and you are a real Christian. But, even among the fundamentalists there was not complete agreement on the fundamentals of the faith. Many denominations splintered and were formed during this period of church history.

And the Presbyterian Church once again decided not to answer the question, at least in the way that it was asked. The Presbyterian Church said that the fundamentals of the faith are contained in the Bible and our Confessions of faith. It is not up to us to boil those fundamentals down (or some would argue “dumb those standards down”) into some easy to remember formula. Life and faith are more complex than that.

THE NICENE CREED

We shouldn't be surprised that we continue to struggle about the basics of faith. Questions about the essence of faith have been a source of contention from the very beginning of the church.

For example, in the early church there were some who said that Jesus was a good man and a good teacher. In that sense he was “God's Son.” But, there were others in the church that said Jesus was who he said he was. The Bible tells us that Jesus was the Word made flesh. Jesus was in the words of the Nicene Creed “very God of very God.” Jesus was of “one substance with the Father.”

The church struggled with this for over 125 years before they finally developed the Nicene Creed. We can read it in just a few moments, but the implications of that Creed for the faith of the church cannot be underestimated.

If the church had decided that Jesus was not who he said he was, then what is the point of following Jesus? If Jesus was not the Son of God, he was delusional and we of all men and women should be pitied.

But, fortunately for us those early Christians took their faith seriously. Even though it was a severe test they worked to preserve the essence of the faith.

I hope this little bit of church history shows you that the lawyer's question was not as easy as it first seemed. Summarizing the faith of a people can be difficult and contentious even when we have a history of interpretation to help us.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

But, living that basic faith can be harder still. I asked the folks in my Bible studies, “What is harder to love God or to love neighbor?” Almost everyone said that it was harder to love our neighbor.

That's true of course. It is hard to love our neighbor.

In fact I have a bit of sympathy for the lawyer when he asked in Luke's version of this story, "And who is my neighbor?" I think he was hoping for a lawyer like answer that would help him manage this core belief that was so hard to put into practice. Maybe neighbors are only those who respond to us in a positive way or those who live close to us.

But, in Luke's account that wasn't what he got. He got the parable of the Good Samaritan, the gist of which seems to be that a neighbor is anyone who has a need. That's an awful big neighborhood.

Maybe God can love that many people, but how can we?

Once again, the trick is not saying what we believe. The trick is putting what we believe into practice. How can we love God and love neighbor?

I don't know about your neighbors, but some of mine are hard to love! Like Luke's lawyer I want to make the neighborhood more manageable!

And the rest of the Bible doesn't make it any easier for us. James tells us to show our faith by what we do, and in the John's first letter we read this very difficult passage. He wrote to the early church, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, who he has not seen." (1 John 4:20)

In other words, the incarnation is not just about God being in Jesus. It is also about Jesus being in us. The Spirit of the living God as revealed in Jesus walks the earth through the loving actions of disciples today.

KNOWING VERSUS DOING

Are you beginning to see why the lawyer's question was a greater test than even he first imagined? The orthodox beliefs that we proclaim so easily are very hard to put into practice! There is always the temptation to just say the right thing with no real commitment to do the right thing.

A while back our denomination put out two separate Sunday school curricula based upon two distinct philosophies. One track was called "Knowing the Word" and the primary goal of this curriculum was to teach people facts about the Bible. The other track was called "Doing the Word" and the purpose of this track was to teach people Christian ethics. What do those facts in the Bible require of us?

Do you know which track was most successful? Knowing the Word was more successful by far. We can handle learning facts about the Bible. It is not so easy to think about the claim that story has on our lives. Doing the Word is far more difficult.

But, in our lesson for today Jesus tells us that knowing is not enough. We have to do something. We have to put the word into action through our love of neighbor. We try to put ourselves into our neighbor's shoes and treat them like we would like to be treated. That's love. It is a love that enables us to see the human face of God.

When we studied this passage in theology class my distinguished professor, Shirley Guthrie said that we have put too much emphasis on the last part of this verse. Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

And some have gotten all psychological on us and said that this verse is about self-worth. We have to practice loving our selves so that we can love our neighbor.

But, the trouble of course is that we never quite get around to loving our neighbor. We spend too much time in therapy trying to learn how to love us first! I would suggest that a solution might be to spend less time in self-analysis and more time doing what faith requires.

Jesus had it right. Loving God and loving neighbor really are two sides to the same coin. Both are necessary.

LOVE IS A DECISION

Doing what faith requires is certainly not an easy or even natural thing to do. But, it does help to understand what is being asked of us. Loving our neighbor does not mean that we have a certain feeling about our neighbor.

Love (in the biblical sense) is not an emotion. Love is a decision. Love is a decision to act in a certain way toward our neighbor because God in Christ has first loved us. (cf. 1 John 4:19) Love is an act of the will, and in many cases love requires courage.

Our culture does not think about love in this way. When we use the word love we are talking about an emotion, a passive response to something outside of us. For example, many of us love chocolate. We can't help it. That's why I linger around the candy aisle in the grocery store. I know I can't have it but I love it!

That's not biblical love. Nor is love what is commonly referred to as romantic love. She saw him, and it was love at first sight. Maybe so, but if that love is going to last, there will have to be some loving actions on both sides to go with that initial crush.

I have seen this misunderstanding take hold in the church. Someone comes to a church and loves everything about it. But, then they stay long enough to find out that yes this church and its pastor are quite flawed, just like the others they have attended. So, they go where the grass is greener. Often those folks never find a church home because the feeling of love never lasts.

Remember this if nothing else. Love is not a feeling. Love is a decision.

Why did God love us? It wasn't because we are so cute and cuddly. God loved us out of God's own gracious nature. God is patient with us and forgives us not because we deserve it. God loves us because God is merciful and kind. We are saved on the basis of God's gracious nature and not on the basis of who we are and what we have done.

And if this is the God in whom we believe, then it stands to reason that we too should be patient and generous with others. If we have experienced the grace and forgiveness of God then we too should be a gracious and forgiving people.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOVE

I must admit that we will all give each other numerous opportunities to practice what we preach when it comes to love and forgiveness! The important thing is to put ourselves into those situations where love of neighbor is not just a theory but an opportunity.

A preacher told about a youth group's mission trip. A bored adolescent used paintbrushes and hammers to improve other people's homes. He told his pastor that he had a religious experience that week.

He said that it suddenly dawned on him that the world didn't revolve around him and his friends. As he committed his time and strength to repairing the home of some strangers, he began to take an interest in them. He learned their names and ate at their table. When they asked him to say grace at dinner one evening, he suddenly had a deep and abiding sense that God cared about all of them.

He concluded, "If I stayed home to play Nintendo, I would have never known it."

There was a lady who noticed the flowers for the worship service were left behind one day. She didn't want them to go to waste so she decided to take them to someone who might enjoy them.

When she arrived with the bouquet at the nursing home the first person she saw the flowers thought they were meant for her. She didn't have the heart to tell her otherwise so she gave her the flowers and returned the next Sunday with flowers for somebody else. Eventually she made her way through the whole nursing home.

She said, "These people are precious to me and to the Lord. There's nothing like a cheerful visit to bring the joy of Christ to another child of God."

Now this lady didn't know these people before she took the flowers that day. If she had simply gone home after worship she might have missed out on what became the most important two hours of her week.

I'm not sure what neighbor God wants you to love today, but I do know that we all have our own unique opportunities. Somewhere along the road of life there is broken and bleeding traveler who needs the touch of God. Somewhere there is someone who needs the ministry of a Good Samaritan.

And through that ministry we learn what it truly means to love God with all our heart, soul and mind.

Amen.