

Year A Proper 30 The Love that is Commanded Matthew 22 vv34 to 46

The Sadducees and the Pharisees have been taking turns challenging Jesus in Jerusalem. They have been questioning his identity, trying to discredit him and remove his authority in the eyes of the people, asking him tough questions that, they had hoped, would trip him up and show him to be just another wannabe revolutionary, not the Messiah.

It hasn't worked though. Their attempts to discredit Jesus, to challenge his authority, to turn the crowd against him...it hasn't worked. Jesus has been winning the war of words and today Jesus ends these malicious skirmishes with a question that none of them can answer.

His question concerns a troubling phrase in Psalm 110. Psalm 110, believed to have been composed by King David, says, "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" In other words, God said to the master of King David, take your throne beside me until I have conquered your enemies for you to rule over them. This psalm goes on to describe the worldwide victory of this unknown king, the one sitting on the throne beside God, the one King David calls his "Lord." It is a psalm about the coming Messiah who will conquer all of Israel's enemies. The Messiah in Matthew's Gospel, is called "the Son of David." The Sadducees and Pharisees have just confirmed that as well. It's a well-known, accepted fact found over and over again in Scripture – the one God sends to rescue Israel – the Messiah – will be of the line of David. So, the problem is that King David would never call one of his descendants his master, his "Lord." How can the Messiah be the "son of David" if David is calling this Messiah his Lord? The religious leaders don't have an answer and Matthew tells us that this incident put an end to the testing of Jesus.

We know the answer to Jesus' question. Matthew provides the answer at the beginning of his Gospel story. Matthew gives us Jesus' family tree and shows us that Jesus is of the line of David. Why does King David call Jesus, "Lord"? Because Jesus is also the Son of God, God become flesh to dwell among us. Fully human. Fully God. This is a hard thing to believe and even more difficult to understand. But Matthew brings us on a journey of discovery and understanding – showing us who Jesus is. We witness his disciples realizing and acknowledging who Jesus is when Peter declares, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16). We journey with the crowds who are in awe of his healings and astounded by the authority of his teachings (7:22, 9:8, etc.), crowds who wonder aloud in amazement, "Can this be the Son of David?" The Messiah? (12:23). And then, certain that he is, they sing "Hosanna to the Son of David" as he enters Jerusalem on a donkey (21:9). The Sadducees and the Pharisees also witness his healings, they hear of his other miracles, they listen to his teachings but, unlike the disciples and the crowds, they do not believe him to be the Messiah – Son of David and Son of God. Jesus, in fact, has earlier quoted from Isaiah to describe the religious leaders: "You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them" (13:14-15).

We see the lack of belief and understanding of the religious leaders and we know that they are choosing this path, holding fast to their power and authority by being close-minded, closed to the newness that Jesus is offering to them, closed to the reality that new ways of being and thinking can be true.

Although Jesus himself, as the Messiah, is a new concept of the Messiah because he is not the fully human warrior king that a lot of the people had been expecting, the new way of being and thinking that Jesus is showing to the religious leaders, it turns out, is not new: different from the thinking and behaviours of the religious leaders – and a whole lot of other people – but not new. Jesus firmly grounds his teachings in the ancient scriptures of the Jewish people – the law and the prophets.

We see this in his answer to the lawyer's question. A lawyer was an expert in the law and he asks Jesus which commandment in that law is the greatest. Jesus' answer is the phrase familiar to most church-goers: "'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 neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

This would have been the exact same answer the Pharisees themselves would have given. It is a paraphrase of scripture found in both Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus (19:18). Loving God is the first thing, the most important thing. But, with it comes an unavoidable, inextricably linked second action: to love God means that you also love God's people. The ancient rabbis put it in similar terms: "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Law."

Definitely not new but it is different from what the religious leaders were thinking and doing. Again quoting from Isaiah, Jesus had earlier warned them: "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" (15:8-9). Jesus has, throughout Matthew's Gospel, been pointing out to the religious leaders that they know the scriptures but are not following the scriptures, sometimes deliberately misinterpreting them in order to further their own wealth and status.

His biggest issue with the religious leaders is not their desire to keep the law down to the smallest detail but their tendency to fall short on obedience to central values of the law (again, cf. 23:23). Today's message is that the law is rightly understood when it is read through the central lens of love for God and love for neighbour (with even enemies considered neighbors; 5:43-44). This is not difficult to understand or to preach, but embodying love for God and love for others is the greatest of challenges. The sheer breadth of these two commands makes obedience to them a lifelong effort.

Many people feel that they continuously fall short on these commandments. We often prioritize our lives with God far down on the list and who has not felt dislike – even hatred sometimes – for others? We feel guilty and inadequate. This partly comes from a misunderstanding. Jesus' two great commandments are not new to us – we know them, we've heard them many times, we try to live by them. But, just as in the case of the Pharisees, although they are not new, they are different – different from our current thinking and behaving. How is this the case?

The misunderstanding I just mentioned is a misunderstanding of the biblical concept of love that Jesus is commanding. Love – what we call love – is an emotional reaction to people or things, something that we cannot always control and it cannot be commanded. I love chocolate and potato chips – I can't help myself. On a more serious note, abused women, when asked why they stay with the man who is abusing them, will often reply: "But, I love him. I can't help it." This emotional, passionate love is not a conscious choice and it is not the word that Jesus uses. He uses the word, "agape" – a divine, perfect love. It is what the Hebrew people call the love of God: *hesed*, loving-kindness. This is a love that is chosen because it is a love not based strictly in emotion. It is love that is action. *Hesed* is not feelings we experience whether we want to or not, but, rather, it is active mercy. This love is marked by patience and generosity, and acts

of generosity and patience are acts generated by the one who loves – consciously decided upon by the one who loves. In short, *hesed* or *agape* is love that is a choice, not a feeling. The love that Jesus speaks of is our faithful response to the God who has chosen to love us.

As The Rev. Dr. Clayton Schmidt points out, “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 something as remote, mysterious, and disembodied as the concept of God? We cannot look into God’s eyes, wrap our arms around the Spirit, or even see the [actual physical] face of Jesus of Nazareth” (workingpreacher.org).

Loving our neighbour is just as difficult. If we think of love only as an emotional response to the people around us, we are most definitely not going to love everyone. We cannot look into the face of a stranger begging for money or an enemy who has hurt us and feel unqualified love.

But biblical love, the love Jesus commands of us, is not something that happens 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. This is good news for us and all Christians. To love neighbour as oneself is to act toward the other as one would act toward those close to you. We treat the stranger as well as we treat those that we do love emotionally.

This means that, to those we do love emotionally *and* to those we do not know, to those who may be dirty or repugnant, and even to those who harm us, we can act according to the law of love. We can be merciful and gracious. To love the neighbour as ourselves is to make a conscious choice and act upon it.

What about love of God? God chooses to be patient, generous, and forgiving to imperfect people because we are all imperfect. We can love with our heart: through

generosity, kindness, and patience to God's imperfect people as God does. We can love with our soul: by worshiping God together and praying for ourselves and for our neighbours – even those we don't like, even those who are enemies. And we can love with our minds: studying God's Word and letting it correct us, shape us, enlighten us, and send us out in loving action to the world. The two commandments, "the greatest commandment" and the "second, which is like it" *are* connected. When we love God's people, we are always, and at the same time loving God.

Just because the love that is being commanded of us is not the emotional love of others and God doesn't mean that that the love that *is* commanded – the love that is a chosen, active response – is any easier and that we are not falling short. Jesus shows us this life of love: a life of worship and prayer, a life of healing, caring, sharing, forgiving, teaching – a tough act to follow. Every time we worship together in the Holy Eucharist, we admit that we have not loved God with our whole heart and we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We say that we are truly sorry – are we? – and we humbly repent – do we? Being truly sorry and humbly repenting means that we will try harder and change our ways. Are we any different this week than we were last week when we made those promises, when we said we would try harder and change our ways?

Jesus declares, "'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 neighbour as yourself.' Sometimes our emotions follow suit and we actually feel a love of other, or a love of God. But emotional love is not commanded. The action of loving-kindness is commanded. In Christ, this we can do, with heart, soul, and mind.