

"Love God and Love Neighbor"
 October 29, 2017
 Text: Matthew 22:34-46

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
 Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

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.

In your mind, picture Jesus. The Master Teacher is at it again. Jesus is in the temple, taking on all challengers, debating the finer points of religion and keeping everyone on their toes. This is how Jesus is engaging the leading groups such as the Sadducees and the Pharisees who have been confronting him at every turn in his ministry. Today's passage is no different. Jesus has just finished a debate with the Sadducees about what happens in the resurrection, and now the Pharisees see an opportunity to put him to another test. One of the them, a lawyer, comes forward to test him with a question. This will be someone who knows all the law in the ancient Scriptures, who understands its application, and who will detect anything erroneous in Jesus's response. So let's test him; let's see where his theology is at; let's discover his interpretation of Scripture. *"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"*

The Importance of the Shema

Excellent question. There are 613 commands in Torah for Jesus to ponder; some of greater importance, some lesser. But now, why would you try to stump the Teacher?

Have you not heard about this Rabbi from Galilee? Did you not think he was looking into the Scriptures since he was a child? When it comes to the law, this is a highly educated Teacher. So, which commandment in the law is the greatest? Jesus says,

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." It is the second part of the Shema, the two verse saying from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which the children read earlier in the service:

Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all you soul, and with all your might.

These words have been recited every day by the Jewish people for centuries. They learn them when they are children and families keep them written on small scrolls and placed in boxes that are attached to the doorways of their homes, so they will remember these sayings in all their goings out and comings in.

To love the Lord with all you heart and all you soul and all your mind, Jesus says, is the greatest and first commandment. The lawyer has put the Teacher to the test, but now the Teacher has the lawyer's attention. Obviously there's no debate over the importance of the Shema, but this exchange is not over.

The Second Command

Things get deeper now. More complicated. As the people of God we always understand the command to love God with everything we are. Yes, of course! We love God. Ask any one of us. It goes without saying. Look how we behave. But the kind and patient Teacher now says to the lawyer, *"A second command is like the first: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

This is a reference by Jesus to Leviticus 19, another passage the children read earlier in the service. A command that when coupled with the first, lays out a plan so simple that a child could follow it. Love God and love neighbor. You have to respect a teacher who can keep things simple and easy to follow. But somehow in the course of human history things got messed up. And now the Teacher faces the lawyer and reminds him, *"On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

All 613 laws and all the words of the prophets found in the ancient Hebrew Bible all depend on these commandments. To not follow these two commandments is to throw out all that is contained in the Old Testament. And remember Jesus says he did not come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). In this impromptu lesson with the lawyer, Jesus brings together these two commandments to illuminate how all will be fulfilled.

Whose Son is He?

But there is more the Teacher needs to explain. It's the Teacher's turn to ask a question of his students. Since he has all the Pharisee's attention he asks, *"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?"* Excellent question. The Pharisees live and breathe this stuff. The lineage of the Messiah? It would be like asking a bunch of Trekkies at a Star Trek convention to discuss the lineage of Spock. They jump right on it:

"The Messiah is son of David." This is what Hebrew Bible prophecy indicates (see Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23; Ezek. 37:24) The Messiah, the one who will deliver God's people

from all their enemies will come out of the house of David. The expectations about who and what the Messiah would be was always up for debate, but no one expected what Jesus is about to reveal. They were waiting for a powerful and mighty king to finally crush their enemies—enemies such as the Roman Empire and the surrounding pagans, the Gentiles, and anyone else who threatened their existence.

“You say it is the son of David. 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’?” Jesus is referring to Psalm 110, a psalm written by David, which begins with these words regarding the Messiah. Then he asks them:

“If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”

And with that question the very nature of Jesus Christ begins to come into focus.

Fully Human and Fully God

Jesus does indeed come from the family line of David. We know this from the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel where the genealogy of Jesus is listed. He is, in the parlance of the time, the son of David. He is a living, breathing human being with flesh and blood—fully human. He is one of us; like a neighbor. But his name is also Emmanuel, which means God is with us. And when he is baptized the voice of God speaks and says, *“This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”* Jesus is Lord. Fully God. What no expected is Jesus the Messiah is fully human and fully God.

The Good News

Can the lawyer and the Pharisees grasp this? Can they hear the Teacher? Can you and I grasp this? If we can understand who Jesus is, we can understand who God is and who we are. Listen, we are created in the image of God. We know this from the beginning of the Great Story as told in Genesis. And if God is love, then love is at the core of who we are. When we love we are alive; it is the best of who we are. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son... The good news is that Jesus re-awakens this love within us. Now, this loving Teacher asks a lot with the commands *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”* But put yourself in the place of the lawyer that day and as you face Jesus realize these two commandments can be obeyed with one action: that if you love Jesus, you will be loving God and neighbor!

As We Go

Our deepest need as human beings is love. We need to be loved and we need to love others. As we go back out into our love-starved world that is waiting to hear to some good news, transformation begins with us loving God with everything we are and seeing God in all of life, and working in all situations. When a heart, soul, and mind is coordinated to focus on in all-consuming love of God, things will change. And when we begin to see Jesus in our neighbors, and not just the neighbors we like, but all the neighbors, this world is going to turn around. The Great Teacher gives the simple and practical command, *Love God, and love neighbor.* Look into the eyes of Jesus and make it so. Amen.