



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Love of God and Neighbor

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

September 28, 2008

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Matthew 22:34-40

Whenever a new minister seeks to enter our presbytery, they are always examined by a committee and then asked a question on the floor of presbytery to be sure that their theology measures up. Most of the time, the questioning is fair-minded, but occasionally, a few use this as a chance to score some theological power by exposing anyone who doesn't believe exactly what they believe about God, and the church, and the world—which of course they view as heresy. When that happens, the questions are usually not innocent, and they seldom have definable, objective answers. They are meant to trap, to expose the candidate for the heretic the questioners fear the person may be.

Chapter 22 of Matthew's Gospel is often referred to as "Jesus' Final Exam," because Jesus keeps getting approached by experts in the law and is repeatedly asked difficult, tricky questions. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" "Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" What some call a final exam, we Presbyterians might call an ordination exam. This is Jesus being grilled by the religious leaders, who hoped to do two things: to maintain the purity of the law of God as they understood it, and to expose Jesus as a trouble-making imposter who had neither understanding of nor respect for that law.

So you've got to understand: Those who question Jesus are not so much interested in getting his answer as they are in getting him. They want others to see in Jesus what they see—that he is a trouble-maker through and through. That he doesn't delight in the law of God, but rather that he defiles it. They want the Jewish people to realize that he doesn't believe the law at all. They want the Roman authorities to realize that he's a threat to Caesar. And, they want these things precisely because he is a threat to them and to their understanding of God.

And that's something we too often forget. The Pharisees and their cohorts weren't out to get rid of Jesus because they hated their faith; they were out to get him because they loved their faith, and they were convinced that letting someone who understood God and the world in the radical way that Jesus did would destroy it. They honestly believed that their faithfulness to God demanded that they expose Jesus for the danger to the law they thought him to be. However misguided they may have been, the Pharisees' intentions were in the right place. And, while at times I have my doubts, I would like to think that the same is true of those who ask the trapping questions on the floor of presbytery.

Well the question Jesus is asked in today's passage isn't an easy one to answer: "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" I can see Jesus sitting down to answer this multiple choice question, his sharpened number 2 pencil in hand, and flipping page after page of multiple choice answers. If the test were to list all of the possible answers, it

would have 613 separate options. If the first answer is marked as “a,” then the 613th would be, assuming my math is correct, “w,” 23 times. Just imagine trying to sort through 613 commandments—that’s what the Jewish scholars came up with when they counted the number of commandments in the law—just imagine trying to scroll through 613 possible commandments and being forced to decide which *one* is the greatest.

Which is the greatest commandment? It’s not an easy question to answer. The other night I was trying to get Sarah, our three-and-a-half-year-old, to stop pushing the buttons on the TV. By about the fifth time that she maneuvered her way past my obstacles, and ignored my strong parental command to her, “Don’t touch the TV,” I finally called in help from a higher power. No, not Alayne. I pulled out my Bible and read to her from the law: “If someone has a stubborn and rebellious daughter who does not obey her father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline her, then her father and her mother shall take hold of her and bring her out to the elders of her town at the gate of that place. Then they shall say, ‘This daughter of ours is stubborn and rebellious. She will not obey us.’ Then all of the men of the town shall stone her to death.” I tried to explain to Sarah that this was “time out” taken to its highest degree.” Already attuned to theological debate, she quickly replied, “Daddy, that’s not the greatest commandment.”

Which is the greatest commandment? Is it “Avoid foreigners” or “Welcome the stranger?” Is it “stone them to death” or “Thou shalt not kill?” Which commandment is the greatest?

Do you see the trouble Jesus is in? If he were to answer: “This is the greatest commandment,” then his accusers would have ample room to say, “Aha, we’ve got you now. You didn’t say anything about this. Or this. Or this. Or this.” No matter which way he answered, Jesus is trapped.

So, Jesus, which commandment is the greatest? In some ways, Jesus took answer number 615. The first 613 multiple choice answers listed each individual commandment of the law. Number 614 was the standard “none of the above” answer. Which brings us to answer 615—“all of the above.”

He said to him, 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."

Do you see what Jesus has done? With his answer, he has totally undermined the whole understanding of the law as nothing more than rules and regulations. As Tom Long points out, Jesus is saying that “the...law is about love, not rules, about really loving God and one’s neighbor, not about figuring out how to avoid stepping on cracks in the legal sidewalk.”

This understanding of the law is what sets Jesus apart, and, really, what makes him so threatening to the religious leaders in the story and to us today. It’s this understanding of the law as what it means to really love God and neighbor that is the reason Jesus can reach out and touch a neighbor who is a leper, even though some would have said that doing so broke one of the rules. This is why he could eat with sinners, even though it was

considered a breach of the commandments. To view the law not as a set of legalistic rules and regulations but as a call to love is to turn the church upside down, which is exactly what Jesus did then, and still does today.

Imagine for a moment, now, what would happen if the litmus test question for the church became “Will you seek to love God and your neighbor the way Jesus did?” What if that defined our ministry—our mission? What if everything the church did in the name of the Lord was done out of a deep love for God and for neighbor—a love that stems not from our gyrations and manipulations of the will to make it happen, but a love that is rooted in and given life by the prior love of God for us and all people?

Which commandment is the greatest? It’s a tough question. But the answer Jesus gives is tougher still: Love God and neighbor. When he spoke those words, Jesus upset the “by-the-book” community and he still continues to threaten every neat, simplistic, time-honored answer we hope to give. It’s as if Jesus is saying to us, “No matter how many rules and regulations and statutes you craft, you will never be freed from your responsibility to love.”

Maybe you’ve had it happen to you. Perhaps the law told you “an eye for an eye,” but you stopped the cycle of violence.

Or the rule said “separate but equal” but you chose to eat together.

Or the polity said “women should be silent in church” but you voted for a female to be an elder in this church.

Love God. Love your neighbors. There’s no telling where that could lead.

Are you beginning to see why the answer Jesus gives is not an easy answer? It refuses to view the law of God as some neat set of legalistic responses about how to live and forces us to view life together through the lens of love of God and neighbor. And you better believe life is a lot messier that way. When the only option is to keep up with a living God who keeps drawing the circle wider to welcome more and more in, life will never be neat or free from controversy.

It should go without saying, but it won’t. To say that you ought to love God and neighbor in spite of what someone does is not to say that anything goes. As Douglas John Hall reminds us, that’s not what we in the church say. The church doesn’t ask what love of God and neighbor allows—it asks what does this love require?

Obviously, the staggering economic crisis we find ourselves in now means that some of our neighbors are hurting more than they ever have. Some of us are as well. Let me encourage you to find a way to love your neighbor in a practical or out of sight way this week—a way that helps them know that they are not alone, but that they are loved by you and God. Perhaps that will mean inviting someone join you at your table for a meal. Or it could mean that you will simply take the time to walk through your neighborhood, and to pray for the people who live in each house. Or it could mean... I suspect you can fill in that blank in your own creative way as you respond to the nudging of God’s Spirit.

So, which commandment is the greatest? Love God with all that you are, and love your neighbor as yourself. But be warned: if you do these things—really love God and neighbor—the world will never be the same again. Nothing will be simple ever again.

Perhaps that's the price for a law not carved in stone, but instead written on the flesh of the human heart.