

Sunday, October 29, 2017
21st Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 25 (Year A)

1 Thessalonians 2.1-8; Matthew 22.34-46

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In today's Gospel reading, we see the temple authorities spinning out of control, yet again. Last week we heard the Pharisees try to trap Jesus over the issue of whether one should pay taxes to the empire. Jesus managed to side-step that issue in a way that showed that such secular responsibilities are not antithetical to one's faith.

Then, in a passage that was not included in the lectionary this year, the Sadducees try to trap Jesus in a discussion regarding resurrection. It is alluded to at the beginning of today's Gospel, and I think it's worth taking a brief look at, since it is part of a larger pattern in this part of Matthew's Gospel.

The Sadducees were a sect of Judaism that specifically did not believe in resurrection because it is not in the Pentateuch. While essential to the Christian tradition, resurrection was not essential to the Jewish faith. The Sadducees play devil's advocate in an attempt to make Jesus look ridiculous. "Okay, let's say, for the sake of argument, there is such a thing as resurrection. A man dies childless. Under levirate marriage, the widow marries the dead man's brother in order to produce an heir for the dead man." The scenario the Sadducees set-up has the widow marrying all six of the dead man's brothers, with each brother dying before an heir is produced. They want to know, if there is such a thing as resurrection, who, in the resurrected life, would the woman actually be married to. As they reason it, Jesus would have to either deny the resurrection or state that the woman is guilty of polygamy in the resurrected life by being married to all seven brothers. They get fixated on the technicalities of levirate marriage and not on the more important issue of the validity of resurrection. If only they knew that in just a few days, they would have proof of resurrection.

In short, throughout the part of Matthew's Gospel that precedes today's reading, the temple authorities are getting hung up on the wrong things. They are getting hung up on non-essentials.

Again hoping to trap Jesus, the Pharisees are back at it in today's Gospel. They ask Jesus which of the 613 commandments contained in the Torah is the most important. You shall have no other gods but me? Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy? You shall not murder? You shall not eat shellfish? Undoubtedly, whatever Jesus answers, they will have an argument for why that is not the right answer. "You shall not commit murder, you say? So you're okay with people having other gods then." But if Jesus says the greatest commandment is to have no other gods, the Pharisees could counter with, "well what about the sanctity of life? Isn't that more important?" You get the idea. While these are hypothetical arguments of my own imagining, they are spurious at best. The Pharisees are so out to get Jesus, they will twist his words anyway they can to make him look bad in the eyes of the people in hopes of discrediting him.

Jesus sees through their ruse and responds, “‘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.” (Mt 22.37-40). Jesus’ novel interpretation of the law is that all the commandments can be reduced to just two. “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” In other words, Jesus is focusing on what is essential. All the other commandments contained in the Torah – all 613 of them; all the things that God commanded the people through various prophets of old; all that God asks of the people can be summed up in just two commandments. Love God and love others. That if one only follows these two commandments, all the others will take care of themselves. If you love God, you will have no other gods. You will not make any idols. You will not blaspheme against God. And so on. If you love others, you will not murder. You will not steal. You will not commit adultery. You get the idea. I don’t know how “thou shall not eat shellfish” fits in, but maybe that’s above my paygrade.

Jesus is actually making a pretty savvy theological move here. He points to part of the Shema, contained in Deuteronomy. This is the central scripture of Judaism, which reads, “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 your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6.4-5). For observant Jews, the Shema is considered the most important part of the Jewish prayer service. In addition, it is recited twice a day as a *mitzvah*, or religious commandment. Because of its centrality to Judaism, there is really no denying that this is indeed the greatest commandment. Isn’t this obvious. Isn’t this enough?

When it comes to dealing with the Pharisees? Yes and no. Obviously, in response to the Pharisee’s question, Jesus gives them a second commandment. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19.18) which comes from Leviticus. The reason Jesus expands the parameters and cites a second commandment is because the two – love God and love others – are really a unified whole. But knowing the Pharisees, Jesus knew he had to make sure to cover all the bases. They just might argue that solely focusing on the love of God did not technically mean that you had to worry about other people. At least not in their rigid, literalistic way of interpreting the law.

In appending the commandment to love others, Jesus is making the point that while the Shema is centered on loving God, it implies so much more. It implies the totality of what Jesus is saying. Centered on love of God, it is, by extension, also about the love of neighbor. For the love of God is embodied in the love of neighbor. All are created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, to love God means also loving that which is created in the image and likeness of God. And the converse is also true. Only by loving our neighbor do we truly love God. For if we cannot love the neighbor we can see, and hear, and touch, and yes, sometimes even smell, how can we love God who we cannot see (at least directly) or hear (at least not directly) or touch (at least not directly)? Or maybe another way of looking at it is that only in truly loving the other, who is indeed made in the image and likeness of God, can we truly love God.

Placing the commandments to love God and to love neighbor side by side suggests that love of God leads to love of neighbor, and love of neighbor reveals our love of God. The greatest

commandments as cited by Jesus seem most appropriate because we experience an example of what that looks like in and through Jesus. As the Son of God, Jesus completely loves God the Father with his whole being – body, soul, and mind. In this human form – God incarnate – Jesus consistently loves his neighbors as himself. And quite often, even more than himself. The ultimate act of his love of God is exemplified in his absolute obedience to God. And this is particularly demonstrated in the ultimate act of his love of neighbor by giving himself completely. In his willingness to go to the cross, to die, for the salvation of all humanity.

Placing the commandments side-by-side depicts the law, something often viewed as cold and unyielding, as something more. This text depicts these commandments – depicts the entirety of the law – not as a set of rules, but as embodied love. God’s love embodied in Jesus. And our love of God as embodied in our love of others.

Paul tries to get at this in another way in our Epistle reading for today. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds them that they have not been given the Gospel as something to merely hold on to for themselves. They are to have the courage to share the Gospel with others. Paul compares sharing the Gospel to a nurse gently caring for her children. Paul says we not only to share the Gospel in this way. We are to share ourselves in this way. When we share with one another not only the Gospel but also our very selves, we demonstrate in tangible ways the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Precisely because we give ourselves to others. This is also a demonstration of our love of God through our obedience to share what he has provided and what he has commanded us to take into the world. In this, Paul specifically asserts that sharing the Gospel is not just a mental act but is an embodied act. An embodied act of love both of other and of God.

In a Gospel founded on the unlimited love of God for his creation, exemplified by the giving of his Son to be with us, exemplified by his Son’s mission and ministry to love without limits the other in his midst, we are called to do likewise and follow Christ’s example. That’s what being a Christian means. Yet, how often do we, like the Pharisees, get hung up on the wrong things instead of focusing on the essentials? Through Christ we are given the opportunity, as he did, to embody the Gospel of love. To embody God’s law of love by focusing on what is absolutely essential to God and to our lives of faith. To love God and to love others. When we focus on these essentials, we will find that all the other things that weigh upon our hearts and minds do indeed take care of themselves.