

Sunday, October 25, 2020

Rev. Robert W. Brown

Matthew 22:15-22

The Shema: "*Everything Else is Just Commentary*"

INTRODUCTION

Over the last month we have followed Jesus into Israel's political and spiritual power center. Jerusalem is where the Jewish leaders hold a dangerously fragile arrangement with the occupying Roman empire. It is a chilly embrace between religion and politics. The famed reformer, teacher, healer, Jesus of Nazareth enters Jerusalem for the first time leading a peaceful yet vocal rally through the streets. They march right up to the gates of the holy temple where, in a calculated and effective act of civil disobedience, Jesus frightens off the money changers who lawfully exploit faithful Jews entering the sacred space. Jesus and his unified band of rebel followers proceed to legally occupy the temple. Both religious and civil authorities fear a riot and conspire together in an attempt regain control. The scene is a powder keg sitting next to a box of matches. They cunningly engage Jesus in the public square in a series of debates designed to discredit him publicly or entrap him legally.

At the same time that we have been looking at this dramatic story on Sunday mornings, many of us have witnessed our presidential debates during the week. These debates clearly reveal two distinctly different candidates with distinctly different approaches. I can't help but notice an eerily similar objective in the presidential race as in the temple debates in Jerusalem; to publicly trip up the opponent and thereby expose them as feeble-minded, incompetent, weak and unworthy of our support.

My objective in following Jesus through Jerusalem is to perhaps learn how God might have us behave in our historic period of civil and political discord and division. When we consider carefully the choices Jesus made in his time of great trial and tension, we might just find a way for us to navigate our way through with a clearer purpose and a defined hope for our future.

As we come into today's scripture, Jesus has already astounded the crowds and humiliated several crack teams of lawyers and scholars who were sent in like political assassins to publicly take him down. And now, in the final round of this temple debate series, we are given the greatest lesson of all.

Listen carefully as our own Grace Campbell reads the play by play from the Gospel of Matthew.

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 22:34-40

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'

This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it:
'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

The Word of God for the people of God...

SERMON

God above us, below us, around us, and in us, thank you for these sacred words of Jesus, preserved through the generations so that we might understand You and follow faithfully in Your Way. We pray that our hearts and minds would receive insight through this text so that we might truly be Your light in this ever-darkening world. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to You our rock and our redeemer. AMEN

The question asked by the expert in the law was a commonly debated theme among scholars and Rabbis. So, the scholarly lawyer lobs the old chestnut at Jesus. Of the 613 individual laws written in the Torah, which one *single* law is the greatest? Jesus easily fields the pitch, quoting from Deuteronomy 6 verse 5. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." To this day, this verse is arguably the most well-known in all Jewish liturgy because it is part of a creedal prayer called the *Shema*. For practicing Jews, the *Shema* is the centerpiece of the daily morning and evening prayer services and is considered by many to be the most essential prayer in all of Judaism, kind of like The Lord's Prayer is for Christians. Jesus' answer is indisputably correct. But he doesn't stop there. He tacks on to his answer a lesser known commandment written in Leviticus 19¹, saying, "And the second greatest commandment is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

It is the connection of these two commands that stuns all who hear it because connecting love of God to love of neighbor completely reorients how the sacred Law and the Prophets are to be understood and obeyed. Essentially the *way* to love God is to love your neighbor as yourself. Up until this moment, the two had never been so inextricably linked. And it's a game changer because now you cannot simply claim to love God and NOT love your neighbor. The law means nothing apart from how it manifests in the world for the greater good of all. Truly loving God will compel you to care for and pay attention to others around you. In three short sentences Jesus gives us the very core, distilled essence of the entire Bible. Suddenly the abstraction of any theological proposition becomes inescapably tangible, measurable and deeply personal. Loving our neighbor becomes an expression of our love and devotion to God. Love becomes an action that takes us from vague belief to experiential knowledge of God's loving-kindness in the world.

¹ Leviticus 19:18

What's more, here at TriCon Church, we believe God's vision for us is to be that kind of nurturing community of faith that honors God through service and mission! How come it took us so long to articulate that? Love God, love one another, love the world.

I guess we can all enthusiastically agree that this is a really great idea, until we really have to do it! Seriously, continually loving our neighbor can be exhausting, often inconvenient, and insatiable, just as following Christ can be exhausting, inconvenient and insatiable. It takes a lot of effort to be kind when others are mean, to forgive when holding a grudge feels more just. Most of us feel that we will never measure up to such a high standard, and you are right! On our own power, will and thought, the great commandment is impossible. But let's look back at where this all starts...The *Shema*.

Shema literally means, "listen, heed, or hear and do". The starting place is simply to listen. Listen again to the beginning of the prayer.

*Hear O' Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One
Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever.
And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your might.*

The *Shema* begins by acknowledging that *the Lord our God is One*. In Hebrew, that phrase is, *Hashem Echad* and it carries the idea that there is no existence outside of God. God is all encompassing. All things come out of, and fold into God's self. The phrase, *God is one* contains the notion that God is essentially all there is. You and God are already one. If for one nano second God stopped loving you, you'd cease to exist. You would simply vanish! That's a mind-blowing realization. God's love for you is NOT contingent on your goodness, obedience, or religious practice. That's the human scale, not the heavenly one.

To know that God has loved you into existence and will never let you go no matter how badly you screw up is the beginning of loving God back. When we receive that kind of mercy, it leaves little choice but to love God with all you've got, all your heart and all your soul and with all your strength. Heart, soul and strength encompasses the entire being, every single aspect that makes you, you. Not just the good parts, everything. To love God with all your heart, soul and strength is simply to acknowledge what already is; God's animating presence permeating your whole being. To love God is to know that every aspect of your humanness matters and is in relationship with God. That is what makes it the first and greatest commandment. It is this kind of unconditional love that is the underlying source and organizing principle of everything else. Filled with the mutuality of this great love, we can't help but love our neighbor because we realize that they too are made in the image and likeness of God and are equally as worthy as you! Suddenly the mutuality is extended outward, both freely given out and received back. This is God's perpetual motion that echos the dance of the trinitarian relationship; continually self-emptying out into the other only to be filled up by another.

As we worship God together this morning, many of us are worried on so many levels. We see the weather getting colder, the darkness encroaching on the day. Our souls are already so

weary from quarantine. We all know that our holiday traditions will most certainly be affected. We are yearning for what's on the other side of this pandemic and cannot wait for the phrase "social distancing" to fade from our lexicon. We are deep into this uncharted wilderness, and still wonder what will happen next in this foreboding land. So many of us carry this underlying tension with us every second of the day. We continually sense a multitude of unseen threats lurking just around the bend.

What can learn from what Jesus teaches us is that absolutely everything in heaven and earth is inextricably bound up in the mutual exchange of God's love. When we choose to love God and one another with our whole being, we can begin to consciously trust God with all our fears and uncertainties. Loving anything, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength means TRUSTING with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Loving God takes us beyond a feeble faith into a reliable trust in God. A trust so strong that it allows for the fact that we will suffer, that we may also inflict suffering, we will go the wrong way and make mistakes. Trusting in the primacy of a loving God, we find that we are able to enter into and through the cold, dark night we face with our eyes wide open because we know that God is one, God is *Echad* - in everything and everyone.

According to Jesus, it appears that the true meaning and purpose of every single life, every single church, synagogue, masque, religion, organization, institution and nation can be summed up in four words, *LOVE GOD, LOVE OTHERS*. It's both the "what" and the "how". What do we do? We love God. How do we love God? We love our neighbor as ourselves.

In the tensions and struggles of this uncertain time, we are given the choice to trust that this core principle of mutual love always wins. The great mystic and spiritual teacher, Meister Eckhart said, "*All through the day remember; if God were everything to me, nothing could disturb me.*" This is not wishful thinking, this a tangible, active faith that is convinced that, in the end, it will all work out, and if it's not working out, it's not the end. This is the good news of the Gospel and our real hope for what's ahead.

*Hear O' Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One
Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever.
And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your might, and love your neighbor as
yourself.*

Everything else is just commentary. AMEN