

Reflection for Fellowship@10

29th October 2023

Text: Matthew 22:34 - 46

Title: Putting Love Before Everything Else

Introduction

The Pharisees and the Sadducees have been taking turns, as if by design, trying to trap Jesus. Last Sunday in Matthew 22:15-22 We have the Pharisees and the Herodians ganging up to entrap Jesus:

"Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

This time it is the turn of the Pharisees to test Jesus in the hope of trapping him in his own words and thereby demonstrate their superiority over him.

Remember Jesus had just exposed the Sadducees' false understanding of resurrection when they tried to trap him with a question about marriage (Matthew 22:23-33).

Given the Pharisees' fervent disagreements with the Sadducees on theological issues such as resurrection and political issues such as the Roman rule, one might have expected them to celebrate Jesus rendering the Sadducees speechless. They had a lot more in common with Jesus theologically and politically than they did with the Sadducees. So, why do you think they try to trap him again?

Let's not forget that the Pharisees, the interpreters of the law, had had been positioning themselves as advocates for the people even as they had been promoting practices such as the purity laws that were at odds with the interests of many ordinary people.

Jesus has been interpreting the Law, as did the Pharisees, but his ability and tendency to interpret it with clarity, integrity and commitment to the needs of the people at the margins made him a forceful voice and a threat to their authority and popularity.

In this instance, their question about the greatest commandment is seemingly a straightforward one but it is far from one.

The Pharisees have been presenting their emphasis on tradition and purity laws as an expression of their love of God and their commitment to the greatest commandment articulated in Deuteronomy

6:5: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

They think if they can get Jesus to admit that the commandment to love God was, in fact, the greatest commandment, they can claim that they have been right all along and silence Jesus. If Jesus refuses to admit that it was the greatest commandment, they can accuse him of blasphemy.

Jesus quickly made it clear that a sophisticated and responsible interpretation of scriptures cannot be reduced to a simplistic understanding of the greatest commandment.

You and I know that being religious cannot be compressed into a single goal.

Jesus quotes the commandment from Deuteronomy — *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind* — and rightly calls it the greatest commandment.

And then he quickly adds the qualifier “first.” The qualifier clarifies that there is more to it and anticipates a second commandment from Leviticus 19:18 — *Love your neighbour as yourself.*

While the first commandment represents the vertical dimension of one’s faith (human-divine relationship), the second commandment represents the horizontal dimension (human-human relationship). The second commandment is comparable to the first in emphasis and significance.

The quick succession and the manner in which Jesus states the two commandments highlights a complimentary and symbiotic relationship between the two. Remember the second builds upon the foundation of the first but the first manifests itself through the second. While the second is built upon the first, the first is not complete without the second.

Loving our neighbours is an act of loving God in whose image the neighbours are mostly made.

One cannot claim to love God unless one does everything in one’s capacity to love one’s neighbours. In short, Jesus cannot emphasize the first commandment to the exclusion of the second nor can he fulfill the second without attending to the first. One’s love of God should extend itself to love and care for one’s neighbours.

Too often in the church, 'love' is used as an excuse to take the path of least resistance instead of the path of excellence.

When telling the truth would be uncomfortable, we practice equivocation and call it 'love.'

How frequently 'love' is code for 'the desire not to upset anyone'.

How frequently 'love' is code for 'peace at all costs'.

How frequently 'love' is code for 'not my problem, it's a private matter'.

Our definition of 'love' is often suspiciously easy, on and for us.

But this is not the definition of love that Jesus is working with in Matthew. The Jesus we see in these stories thinks that to love God with the whole self, with "*all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind*" (verse 37) is demanding and risky.

Following the path of love leads him to jump into debates and conflicts with his whole self. Love leads Jesus into all kinds of situations that are not just uncomfortable, but dangerous.

Eventually, love gets him killed. It's a costly love.

Love requires us to act.

But there is much to learn by seeing the love of Jesus in action.

The same love that inspired Jesus to eat with the outcast, reach out to the untouchable, heal the sick, and embrace the powerless, also drove him to confront the demonic, outmanoeuvred the manipulative, and correct the clueless.

Jesus was no pushover and the story of his ultimate decision to relinquish power for the sake of his Father's mysterious will is all the more

fascinating against the backdrop of these accounts of his prowess in the face of his enemies.

Jesus is a lot more complicated than we sometimes pretend, and the love he taught demands that we expand our whole selves for God and neighbour.

Remember, Jesus had already confronted the Pharisees about how their emphasis on the sabbath laws were indifferent to the basic human needs such as hunger (Matthew 12:1-8).

He also criticized them for their insistence on maintaining certain traditions that were lacking in empathy and care for the vulnerable (Matthew 15:1-10).

In Matthew chapter 23, Jesus offers a series of woes against religious leaders, specifically the Pharisees.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices— mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness."
(Matthew 23:13)

His words are a forceful indictment against religious leaders who have been undermining the interests of their vulnerable neighbours using religion as a cover.

Jesus ends his exchange with the Pharisees by calling upon what they would have known too well — the Law and the prophets. The Law requires righteousness as an expression of commitment to God's will. The prophets demanded justice for people at the margins.

Righteousness and justice are intrinsically connected and are predicated upon being in the right relationship with the divine and with fellow human beings. One cannot be in the right relationship with God unless one does everything possible to be in the right relationship with one's neighbours as well.

Loving God should be at the core of one's faith but is incomplete by itself.

Read my lips...

If one's love for God does not translate into love for neighbours — near and far — or, even worse, prevents one from loving neighbours, it is a façade designed to cover up indifference and hostility towards one's neighbour.

The text is a reminder that our identity as people of faith is dependent on our ability and willingness to ensure justice for our neighbours who are denied the most basic rights.

Remember our commitment to justice is never an abstract idea but should manifest itself in concrete contexts and concrete actions.

Similarly, while we are called to pray in situations of oppression, our prayers seeking justice for the oppressed should become a catalyst for action rather than a substitute for action. While this truth is not difficult to understand or to preach, embodying love for God and love for others is the greatest of challenges.

To love those with whom we are intimate,
to love those we do not know,
to love those who may be dirty or repugnant,
to love those who do not share our values,
and even to those who harm us,
we can act according to the law of love.

Biblical love is something we do. It is loving-kindness, merciful action that is both generous and continuous.

'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.'*

Finally, the author of 1 John sums it all up:

"Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

Loving God and loving others Are two sides of the same coin.

If you agree say, AMEN!