

October 23, 2011
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18
Matthew 22: 34-46

"Final Questions on the Final Exam"

All efforts to trap Jesus and publicly discredit him by catching him in some sort of contradiction against the Law of Moses, or in some statement of blasphemy against the traditions and worship of Judaism, or even some comment that would expose him as a traitor against Rome had become for the Jewish political and religious leaders something of a greased pig contest. Just when you think you've surely got him wrapped up ...sprit! ...there he goes; ...foiled again, ...with those trying to catch him left face down in the mud!

The nearest thing I can think of that comes close to the kinds of exchanges between Jesus and the Jewish leaders would be like the televised political debates we see in the campaigns leading up to the primary elections. All the candidates look for each other's dirty laundry, saying things, asking questions, doing whatever they can to catch one another in contradictions or revelations of unsavory character.

Ever since arriving in Jerusalem, a cat and mouse game has gone on between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. This, however, was no light-hearted, fun and games affair with an election hanging in the balance. This was a serious matter of life and death, as we know ...because we know what ultimately happened.

For somewhere in the neighborhood of three years, Jesus' ministry has been out in the public. He moved around throughout the region of Palestine, teaching, preaching, and demonstrating that the Kingdom of God has now come among us with power and in glory. With the coming of Jesus, God's Kingdom has now become the present and future hope for all who come to believe. Wherever Jesus went, he called people, just as he calls us today, to let go of their emotional, their psychological, their spiritual, and their physical attachments to this world: possessions, positions of prestige and power, celebrity and notoriety, and to begin living lives that reflect the goodness, the forgiveness, the compassion, the generosity, the love and the justice that are the defining characteristics of God's Kingdom now ...and in the world to come.

Not only did Jesus' teaching, preaching and actions expose the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders in front of their own people, the idea of

following in the ways Jesus taught demanding radical changes in the current system of religion and government, ...changes that would dramatically alter the status quo of the lifestyles enjoyed by the Jewish leaders. They were threatened by Jesus and this new kingdom he was proclaiming ...indeed, a kingdom unlike any other the world had ever previously known.

The Jewish leaders did everything they could to prove Jesus to be a hoax, a phony, a charlatan. And the Church today should be glad that they did. Do any of us want to be served by physicians, surgeons, attorneys, electricians, plumbers, contractors, pastors who have not demonstrated their knowledge and capabilities by taking and passing some kind of examination, board or the standards of some certifying agency?

Recall those examiners who came to Jesus to test him in the last days of his life among us:

1) First the chief priests and the elders came to Jesus and asked him by what authority he did the things he did. "Who gave you this authority?" When Jesus asked them about their treatment of John the Baptist, who also came to proclaim the advent of the Kingdom of God, ...their rejection of yet another of God's Prophets was exposed, and they left Jesus alone.

2) Then, forming a most unlikely alliance of Jews who detested one another, Pharisees-in-training and Herodians came to Jesus and asked him if it was lawful (for Jews) to pay taxes to the (Roman) emperor or not? Supposedly caught in a no win trap between a crowd that might turn on him if he answered "Yes, it is lawful;" or be arrested for sedition by Rome if he said, "No, it is not lawful." Jesus asked for a coin used to pay taxes to Rome and asked the Jewish leaders, "Whose image and whose inscription is on the coin?" They answered, "The emperor's." "Well then," Jesus continued, "it must belong to the emperor. Give back to him what is his, but for those of you who have (and I paraphrase) the image of God inscribed on your hearts, give back to God that which belongs to God, (your heart and your soul)."

3) Next, a third group of Jews came to Jesus, the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection. As a sign of their deceitfulness, they tested Jesus with a question regarding to whom we will be married in the resurrection (which they did not believe in) if we have been married multiple times in this world. Jesus responded that they

neither knew their scripture nor had any concept of the power of God. Very interestingly, Jesus said there is no marriage in God's Kingdom like we know and think of marriage in this world. Then Jesus slammed their lack of faith by saying: "God is God, not of the dead, but of the living." ...implying that because they lack faith, they may as well be dead, for even now, they are cut off from God. The Sadducees walked away in dumbfounded silence.

4) And so today, we hear the final answer to the final question on Jesus' final exam. Once again the Pharisees are the culprits. They pick from among themselves their most brilliant, most capable lawyer, an F. Lee Bailey or a Johnny Cochran, or some such lawyer of notoriety. Actually, these are not good examples for comparison, because the kind of lawyer spoken of and sent to test Jesus was a theologian, an expert in the Torah, the Law of Moses, and he knew just how to interrogate Jesus: "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Again, the effort on the part of the Jewish leaders was to entrap Jesus. But how was this to work? The question seems rather benign and Jesus' answer is the quotation of Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This verse was a key element in Jewish worship and many Jews, especially the very devout, would have recited it several times a day. And then Jesus added to his answer a quotation from Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Tom Long. Matthew. Westminster Bible Companion. p. 255.) This seems very straight forward.

But here's the catch. Jewish scholars (read as lawyers) counted up 613 separate commandments in the Torah. (Tom Long. Matthew. Westminster Bible Companion. p. 255.) (And you thought there were just 10?) If Jesus were to pick one commandment as being the greatest over the other 612, he would have been exposed to their criticism for not picking any of the other 612. It's like if I were to ask you, "What is the most important rule in baseball?" You answer me, "Three strikes and you're out." Then I respond: "You are wrong! That rule is no more important than 'four balls and you walk!'" (Tom Long. Matthew. Westminster Bible Companion. p. 255.)

Or, take the laws we heard read earlier from the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus. Which of those is greater? Should we focus on justice toward our neighbors? Yes, certainly. Or, what about forgiving our

kinfolk their wrongs against us? Yes, for sure. How can we choose which is more important?

But Jesus' answer accomplished two things: 1) By stating the essence of the Jewish faith that above and beyond all else we are to love God with all our heart, mind and soul, Jesus demonstrated himself to be completely orthodox as a Jew with his ultimate devotion to God to be beyond question. But he did not stop there. 2) Going beyond loving God, Jesus affirms that the greatest commandment is that which calls us to love God, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. This is what God wants of us!

The whole of all God's law is about love, not about keeping rules, not about doing certain things because the Bible tells us to. The whole environment of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom that is coming upon us here and now in this world, as well as in the world to come is defined by the reality of God's love for us; our love for Him; and our love for one another. It is this Great Commandment to love that makes us the Church. It is this Great Commandment to love that guides and directs us into ministries for others.

There is this relatively new minister in our community (Florence) who has shown up at the Shoals Community Soup Kitchen every Friday I have been there recently. (He may come on Saturdays as well. I just don't know about that.) It is clear to me that he is getting to know the people who come to be fed, as well as those who come to serve. He sits down and speaks with people, regardless of their apparent station in life. I ask myself: "Why does he come here regardless of whether his church is involved in serving?" In my heart I know why. God has written the law of His Great Commandment upon this pastor's heart! As I watch him mingle with people, I see a life that demonstrates the depth of his love of God, and his love for others. He does not do this because a written code of rules or commandments tells him to. He does it because his life has been transformed by his faith in Jesus. He does it out of his gratitude for God's love for him, made real in his life in Jesus Christ.

My friends, look for these kingdom qualities in the lives of others. Let us emulate them in ourselves. People such as this strengthen us and inspire us to let ourselves be transformed through God's love for us, our love for God, and our love for others.

Though Jesus passed his final, overall exam with flying colors, one is almost led to say, "What a shame." The snares of the Jewish leaders foiled; their tricks upended, their test questions shredded, there were no more ways left to expose Jesus as a fake or a phony. While the Pharisees were all still together, surrounded by the crowd, Jesus asked them several final questions, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" This query, as you remember, hearkens back to the question Jesus asked his disciples at a much earlier point in time: "Who do people say I am? Who do you say I am?" Peter got that answer right: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

The Pharisees, representing all who live by rules and put faith only in themselves, missed the point. Concerned with losing their status and their prestige in life; fearful of having the relative safety and security of their lives being turned upside down, failing to recognize Jesus' authority and where it came from, there was nothing left for them to do but kill him. That's what we all seek to do when the cost of discipleship becomes too great for us.

It would only be a matter of a short time, and the end would come, ...upon a cross. But thanks be to God that all who have the image of God and the name of Christ inscribed upon our hearts, this cruel and unjust end has become the new and glorious beginning of the Kingdom that has become our home; the Kingdom in which we live to love God and to love others, just as He has always loved us.