

Sermon - The Lawyer, Jesus & Love

Matthew 22

A couple is driving to the courthouse to get married when they are involved in a fatal collision. The young couple find themselves at the pearly gates being greeted by St. Peter. Disappointed that they didn't get married, they ask Peter if it is possible to get married in heaven. Peter looks confused and says, "I've never been asked that before, let me go and check."

They sit and wait and wait and wait. While they are waiting they get talking about being married for eternity and wonder what would happen if it doesn't work out. They wonder if they would be able to get divorced. St. Peter returns about 3 months later with an answer to their first question, which is, yes, you can get married.

The couple then say they have another question and ask St. Peter if they would be able to get divorced if they wanted. Peter goes red in the face and looks immensely frustrated and bothered by this question. He responds, "It took me three months to find a priest up here to answer your first question. Do you know how long it will take me to find a lawyer?"

In today's gospel we have a lawyer, one of the Pharisees trying to bring Jesus down by tricking him with this question about the most important commandment. The Sadducees have already had a go at him with questions about marriage and taxes, but to no avail.

There is no authentic desire to know or learn in this Pharisee. In fact, the use of the title "teacher" is not a sign of respect, but said in a sarcastic, sneering tone. As if to say, "so you call yourself a teacher, but let's just show everyone how little you actually know."

There are 613 commandments given in the Hebrew Scriptures. Some are referred to as "heavy" - that is carrying more weight, but all are accorded importance as all were given by God. The Pharisees, experts in the Jewish Law, have an answer for whichever commandment Jesus might choose as the most important. Lawyers, as Jewish Rabbi's, are infamous for their

classic arguing technique. In their minds, it doesn't matter how Jesus answers, they intend to wrap him up in legal arguments and leave him looking like a fool.

Unfortunately, they have chosen the wrong person to argue with.

Jesus wraps the two commandments - love of God (from Deuteronomy 6) and love of neighbour (from Leviticus 19) - together in a classic corollary. Each commandment is intertwined and interdependent on the other. And by stating them in this way, Jesus effectively silences the legal masterminds of the day.

These words are so familiar to us as we use them most often as an affirmation of faith. You could say, as Jesus does, that everything else is secondary to this commandment. As Christians we may argue over all sorts of doctrine and practice (and we do), but not one of us can argue against this commandment.

It is important to come back to this commandment, to be reminded of it, and to take time to unpack it, consider it and remember it deeply.

Especially for us modern folk who more often than not, when we hear the word "love", think of romantic or emotional love. Love is a feeling. It is a feeling that brings pleasure. When we are "falling in love" with another person, we can't get enough time with them. And when we end relationships, we often say, "I don't love you anymore".

This is NOT the love that Jesus is speaking about.

As the Biblical scholar Douglas Hare points out "In an age when the word 'love' is greatly abused, it is important to remember that the primary component of biblical love is not affection, but commitment."

He continues, "Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we consider all that God has done for us. But Deuteronomy 6:5 is not talking about warm feelings but stubborn, unwavering commitment. To love the neighbour (including our enemies) does not mean to feel affection for them, but to imitate God in taking their needs seriously." (Hare 260)

Stubborn, unwavering commitment as we imitate God and take the needs of all people, including our enemies, seriously.

This passage has left me thinking this week about who I need to love (that I perhaps am not loving at the moment) and how can I love them.

How do I love the person who has been less than kind to me?

How do I love the person, the neighbour, who is hidden from me because of the pandemic - I think of those isolated in nursing homes?

How do I love the family member who always seems upset with me no matter what I say or do?

I share these questions with you, but not the answers. I invite you, as I have felt invited, to ask these difficult questions of ourselves. To take some time this coming week to ponder how to love those we do not currently show love to - for whatever reason that might be.

How could God be inviting us to love in new ways?

At the end of our service today we will be pondering the words of the song, "Draw the Circle Wide". Open your heart and your mind as you meditate on the words...

Draw the circle wide. Draw it wider still. Let this be our song, no one stands alone, standing side by side, draw the circle wide.

Let our hearts touch far horizons, so encompass great and small; let our loving know no borders, faithful to God's call.

Amen

