

Sunday October 25, 2020
Jeff reflects on Matthew 22:34-40

Jesus told parables. He told stories. He answered questions by telling a story.

The parables of Jesus are engaging, inviting us, enticing us, challenging us to discover God in both the parable and in this world in which we live.

But today's scripture reading from Matthew's gospel, is an exception. In this passage, Jesus is asked a question and he actually answers with an answer, not a parable...

Except, that Jesus' can't just give an answer; he has to give two answers that are somehow one answer.

In the scripture, a lawyer asks Jesus a question.

In this context, a lawyer is someone who is a student of the 'law' of Moses, the 'Torah', the first five books of what we know as the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament.

This lawyer is also a Pharisee, a group who sought to follow the Mosaic laws as fully as they could.

We are told that the lawyer asks Jesus a question in order to 'test' Jesus. This is not someone asking in order to learn, this is someone asking in order to decide whether Jesus fits a certain category of acceptability, whether Jesus can be discredited because he can't pass the Religion 101 test.

The question is: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Jesus responds by referring to the words of Moses found in the sixth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, found just after the 10 Commandments.

Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

Love God – let your life be grounded, centred, shaped by God – the presence that permeates all creation, the sacredness that flows through all creation, the Heart at the heart of all creation.

But Jesus doesn't stop with just that answer. He refers to words found in the 19th chapter of the book of Leviticus and says, "There is a second commandment that is like the first one-You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

"On these two commandments," says Jesus, "hang all the law and the prophets."

Jesus seems to be saying, if you insist on trying to shrink all of our history of being God's people, if you insist on having a pithy mission statement, if you insist on giving God a list of priorities, then know that all of our faith, all of our history, all of our laws and all of the words and actions of the prophets who call us to just relations – all of this

hangs on two commandments that cannot be separated from one another – love God and love your neighbour.

Jesus knew that love of God and neighbour was woven throughout their history and teachings. The 10 Commandments begin with commands to worship only God, but then follow commands about sabbath, and about relationships to others – do not lie, do not kill, do not take other's property...

Jesus would embody loving God as loving neighbour – he moved from village to village, healing those who were lame or blind, whose spirits seemed bound and encaged – healing conditions often associated with the trauma of living in a place of military occupation, in a society of massive economic poverty; he shared bread, food with many – he declared that people were 'neighbour' to him, and therefore to God. He taught expressions of non-violent resistance, he prayed and invited others to pray for friend and foe, he saw the image of God in everyone he met...

...and he told his friends of a new commandment – to love one another as he had loved them- to love one another was how you lived out loving God.

We live in a world where so often we declare the 'greatest' or 'the best' – the best film of the year, the best book, the best team, the best song, the greatest golfer of all time, the greatest country...

Jesus won't let us play the 'greatest' game when it comes to God and God's commandments. Faith is not about memorizing a great commandment, but about sharing a great love, God's love – through lives of healing, forgiveness, compassion, just relationship, peace-making, sharing food and resources...

You cannot love God and hate people! Everyone is created in the image of God. Everyone lives in God, and God lives in each of us. Faith in God recognizes that we are all neighboured in God, that walls and ideologies and religions and politics and fears that divide are to be broken down, and we are to love God by creating societies and a global community of beloved neighbours.

I think we all are in need of healing – healing of own fragments and moments of prejudice, pettiness, indifference or hurtful words and actions. We all need to humbly and vulnerably welcome God's spirit awakening new depths of love within us; and we need to trust that everyone else may be in a process of being healed and shaped by God.

Love God and love neighbour as yourself.

Love God by loving the God in yourself and in all others. We are loved by God. Love God and love your neighbour – Jesus says that one love is like the other.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN