

October 29, 2023
“The Answer to Every Question”
Psalm 1 / Matthew 22:34-40
Pastor Tim

I have fond memories of a wedding I attended years ago, two college friends who got married not long after we graduated.

Actually, the memories are tied more to the reception. For a couple of reasons.

First, because my friend, Rose, is Indian American, and so the dance floor was filled with women wearing saris. Anyone who knows me knows that I LOVE to dance at weddings; but dancing in a sea of saris took it to another level. It was magical!

The other reason you may have experienced before at a wedding. Instead of the traditional clinking of glasses to get the happy couple to kiss, tables were required to come up with songs that included the word love – and then stand up and sing together some portion of the song.

It was a great way to connect with people at our table, most of whom I didn't know. The perfect icebreaker – way better than the usual awkward and mundane small talk. It was fun.

And you know, it was a task. A challenge. It was work. We had to WORK to come up with songs, we had to WORK to stand up and sing together in front of a big room full of people. We had to WORK to get the couple to kiss. Nothing cheap and easy.

An apt illustration, really, for the work that love requires.

Last week we heard Jesus mic-drop the Pharisees and Herodians in response to their question about paying taxes to the emperor.

Jesus almost always answers questions like these by redirecting – turning the question back on the one asking, diving into a story, a parable, meant to push the questioner – or anyone within earshot, really – to find the answer themselves.

In last week's encounter with the up-to-no-good religious leaders, he initially responds to their question – "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" – with a question of his own: "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" And then asks them to show him the coin used to pay the tax.

He's presented with a testing, yes-or-no, damned-if-you-answer-yes, damned-if-you-answer-no kind of question, but as we reflected last Sunday, Jesus goes another way.

This week it's the Pharisees again. Having been silenced and AMAZED by Jesus' response to their tax question, and having just witnessed another religious sect, the Sadducees, silenced and ASTOUNDED by Jesus' response to their question about the resurrection (just before our reading this morning), the Pharisees try. Again.

They have no shame. Only this time they designate a spokesperson, a lawyer, to do the testing: "Teacher, what commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Now understand that this was a question that rabbis and Jewish religious leaders loved to debate, in the remarkable tradition of midrash and the thorough, deep-dive examination of Biblical text. Ongoing. Needless to say, it was a question that resulted in lots of different answers.

Midrash, as biblical scholar Wilda Gafney notes, "... asks questions of the text; sometimes it provides answers, sometimes it leaves the reader to answer the questions."

So which commandment, among the 613 contained within Mosaic law, is the greatest? Which is the most important?

In this case, instead of redirecting or responding with a question or a parable, leaving the lawyer and the rest answer the question themselves, as he almost always did, Rabbi Jesus directly, simply, clearly answers the question.

You know the answer. What we now know as the so-called "two greatest commandments" – but really two sides of the same commandment.

And even if you didn't know the answer before this morning, if you know anything about Jesus, you know the answer that's coming.

Because the answer to every question for Jesus, EVERY SINGLE question, is love. Love. Love. Love.

Nothing short of the hard work of love. As we noted last week, the Pharisees' questions always center on what is lawful. And Jesus' answers always center on what is life-giving, loving.

"You shall love the Lord, the Holy One, 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 neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Love. Love. Love.

The commandments are not new, and there is evidence within Jewish tradition that the packaging the two commandments together in this way is not necessarily new. But the lesson is clear. And it's memorable.

Love. Love. Love. Love of God and love of neighbor and love of self all go together.

Note here that these two commandments show up differently in Mark and Luke.

IN MARK, a scribe asks Jesus the question – not to test him, but out of respect for how well he has answered others' questions. He appears eager to learn, and so he does.

The only difference in Jesus' direct response is the inclusion of "strength" with the first commandment. As found in the law, as recorded in Deuteronomy, as in you shall love God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, AND with all your strength."

The scribe affirms Jesus' answer, affirms its wisdom – noting that it's "much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Mercy, not sacrifice. And Jesus assures the scribe that he is "not far from the kingdom of God."

We're also told that after their exchange, "no one dared to ask him any question." NO ONE!

In LUKE, it shows up in response to another lawyer's testing question. But it's an altogether different question: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The same question, you may recall, also asked of Jesus by a rich young man in Matthew and Mark's accounts; a rich young ruler in Luke's.

In THAT case, Jesus answers first by telling him to keep the commandments, and proceeds to list off some of the original Ten – concluding with "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

And you may recall that he then goes on to tell him – with love according to Mark's version, because he was rich – that if he wishes to be "perfect," if he wishes to follow Jesus, he has to go and sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor.

Another angle on loving your neighbor as yourself.

But back to THIS case, where the great commandments show up in Luke, it's not Jesus who provides the answer but the lawyer himself.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus does not answer but instead responds, in good rabbinical fashion, with a question for the lawyer – again, redirecting: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

To which the lawyer responds, verbatim, with these two greatest commandments.

Jesus tells him that he's given the right answer, and that if he ACTUALLY does as he's described, he will live. He will know life eternally, which is to say, abundantly. Not to be confused with immortality.

Love and life go hand in hand. What is loving and what is life-giving go hand in hand.

But unlike the scribe, and unlike the Pharisees' lawyer, this lawyer doesn't stop there. He presses Jesus with a question about the neighbor part: "And who is my neighbor?"

And here Jesus responds with the famous parable of the Good Samaritan.

“Go and do likewise.” And you know, the parable of the Good Samaritan is not sentimentality. It’s the hard work of love across deep difference, even cultural animosity.

Frederick Buechner writes, “When Jesus tell us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. You can as easily produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as you can a yawn or a sneeze. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own ... Thus, in Jesus’ terms, we can love our neighbors without necessarily liking them.”

After all, we don’t always like ourselves. But that should never keep us from loving ourselves.

Rabbi Horowitz, the 16th-17th century Jewish Kabbalist, noted that there are 620 Hebrew letters within the Ten Commandments. The first 613 letters represent the 613 commandments recorded in the Torah.

And the last seven, he suggested, are the leg on which the rest of the commandments stand.

And what are the last seven letters of the Ten Commandments? They appear in the last two words of the 10th commandment, “your neighbor.” As in, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not cover your neighbor’s spouse; or slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to ... your neighbor.”

This leg on which the rest of the commandments stand references the Talmudic story of Rabbi Hillel. When he was asked to recite the entire Torah while standing on one leg, he said, “What you would not have others do to you, do not do to others. This is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary.”

And then, presumably, he put his leg down.

Love God with everything you have. And love your neighbor, as you love yourself, with everything you have, because, IN FACT, to love God IS to love your neighbor.

“Just as you did (or did not) do it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did (or did not do) it to me.”

To love God IS to love your neighbor AS YOURSELF. How you treat your neighbor, how you treat yourself, IS how you treat God! You can't do one without the others.

That's what love is. These are the two greatest commandments. The rest is just commentary.

But going even further, we know that Jesus is quoted in John's gospel as offering a NEW commandment. One he offers after he's shared his final meal with his disciples, after he's predicted that one of them will betray him. The night before he would be arrested, beaten and crucified.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes suggests that with this new commandment Jesus “turbo-charges” the two greatest.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

We are called not just to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, but to love as God loves us. As Jesus showed us.

That, of course, is no small feat. But that's the call. Plain and simple. And hard. Love is hard work.

It is hard work to keep our hearts open and soft to love. But as the Psalmist reminds us, “Blessed are (those) who have grown beyond their greed and have put an end to their hatred and no longer nourish illusions.”

No longer nourish illusions, say, that there are answers other than love to all of our questions.

The Psalmist goes on, "But they delight in the way things are and keep their hearts open, day and night." Keep their hearts open, day and night – that is the hard work of love. Love in any relationship, love between people, love between peoples.

"They are like trees planted near flowing rivers, which bear fruit when they are ready."

Consider the violence and destruction and war – even as we speak – carried out in the name of God, justified under the guise of faithfulness to God or some divine mandate or to religious identity, that inexplicably and completely ignores the leg.

Making idols, false gods, of weapons of war as with weapons of oppression and inequality and poverty – as we explored a couple of weeks ago. Operating within the illusion that violence, that destruction, that war, that walls, that borders are somehow a means to peace. True, lasting peace.

Where there is no justice, there can be no true, lasting peace. All else is illusion.

Blessed are those who name and turn away from their idols, who turn their swords into plowshares. Blessed are those who have put an end to their hatred, and no longer nourish illusions.

You CANNOT love God, you ARE NOT acting in the name of God, you ARE NOT being faithful to God when you de-humanize people. One person or an entire people. When you kill innocents.

There is no such thing as a HOLY war.

Love, for real, for real, for REAL, is hard work.

"Love," as Ursula LeGuin points out, "doesn't just sit there, like a stone, it has to be made, like bread; remade all the time, made new."

And love's cousin, justice – what the scholar, activist and now Presidential candidate, Cornel West, reminds us is what love looks like in public – is hard work.

But it is nonetheless the answer to every question.

As another and now repeat Presidential candidate, the author and humanitarian, Marianne Williamson, has said, "Love is what we are born with. Fear is what we learn. The spiritual journey is the unlearning of fear and prejudices and the acceptance of love back in our hearts. Love is the essential reality and our purpose on earth."

Love is the essential reality and our purpose on earth. Love. Love. Love. So simple. So hard. But still the answer to all of our questions, the calling on all of our lives.

On these two commandments, Jesus says, hang all the law and the prophets. If you remember nothing else, remember these. The rest is commentary.

Go and do likewise.

May it be so.