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Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

Matthew 22:34-46

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***Matthew 22:34-46***

***34When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.******36“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37He said to him, “’You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’******40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”***

***41Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” 43He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,******44‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? 45If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” 46No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.***

The first time the Pharisees argued with Jesus it didn’t end well. After the whole interaction, the pharisees were amazed and left him and went away.

The second time Jesus was questioned was by the disciples of the pharisees and others who followed King Herod. After that interaction, the disciples of the Pharisees were astounded at his teaching.

The third time Jesus was questioned was by another group of Jewish leaders, the Sadducces. In a paragraph just before our reading today, they questioned Jesus and after, they were astounded at his teaching.

After today’s questioning, again by the Pharisees, “No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.”

Who are these people who keep questioning Jesus, going away to regroup, returning for another attempt at discrediting him, going away again, sending others, always regrouping to figure out a way to make Jesus go away.

It’s as if Jesus is Speaker of the House, and they keep going back to their secret ballots behind closed doors to try to get enough votes to throw him out.

Politics were just as secretive and calculating in Jesus day as they are today. In Jerusalem at that time, there was a group of Jewish Temple authorities called The Sanhedrin. They were like the authoritative counsel for Jewish temple life. That group of authorities were made up of Pharisees on the one hand and Sadducees on the other hand. Both groups interested in Temple rules and Temple life, but for different reasons.

The Pharisees were a newer more idealistic ‘political party’ who saw the suffering of the Jewish people of that time as a consequence of so many Jews breaking the Law. The Law of the Torah. The religious requirements and obligations. Their main interest was always about controlling the behavior of Jews, according to the Law.

The Sadduces on the other hand were usually richer and more aristocratic. They owned land. They were men who were related to the priestly classes of the tribe of Levi. They were interested in the rules of the Temple also, from the perspective of tradition.

In the last several weeks we have seen Jesus interrogated by each side of the Temple authorities, questioning his authority, his interpretation of the Law of their scripture, and the Law of the Romans. Each time, Jesus gives a deeper answer and leads the listeners to a new way of framing the question. The temple leaders probably felt tricked. But in the scripture we read this morning, Jesus gives a pretty straight forward answer. That must have surprised them almost as much as Jesus tricky answers.

The Pharisees have come back to him with what was supposed to be a hard question. *“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”*

If someone asked us that question, we might think that it’s too hard to pick which of the Ten commandments is the greatest. Jesus might have had an even harder time, because they weren’t asking Jesus to choose the best of 10. There are 613 Commandments of the Torah. Jesus’ answer was astounding but at the same time very straight forward. Combining Deuteronomy and Leviticus, Jesus’ answer is one that one commentator says that Jesus would have learned at his mother’s knee.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your life and with all your mind” this is “the great and principal commandment.” “Another is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” And then Jesus adds, *40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* A renowned first-century sage named Hillel once paraphrased Leviticus 19:18 for a non-Jew, saying, “Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is **all the Torah**, the rest is commentary. Go study.”1

All of Jesus’ listeners, would have whole heartedly agreed. Uncontested. Uncomplicated.

If the conversation had ended there, there wouldn’t have been anyone going away astounded this time. But Jesus had an agenda too. So while they were all gathered, he asked a question of the temple authorities. He asked them what they thought about the Messiah. Who is he, who’s son is he. The son of David. Again, a well known thought at the time. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem just prior to all of this, he was greeted by the crowd who called out “Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David!” There are other places in the Hebrew texts that explain that the messiah who is coming will be of the Davidic lineage. Remember that Matthew himself felt that the lineage of Jesus was of paramount importance, and begins his entire gospel with the genealogy of the Messiah, and King David in part of that list.

So far in today’s text we have not run into anything controversial.

Jewish tradition of studying scripture is called a midrash – a method used to find meaning that is not directly literal from scripture. It’s a type of question and discussion session that one might find after any discussion of Torah. Jesus’ next question is not so much to catch the authorities in another trap of their own, but to initiate this type of midrash. When Jesus quotes Psalm 110 said to have been written by David, he follows it up with a question, open for discussion.

David wrote, *44‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’?* Jesus then asked, *45If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”*

In other words, how can David be both the Lord and the son of himself, the Lord? I think Jesus was planting a seed. Jesus’ argument goes, the Christ is both a hereditary son of David and greater than David. What might have been a healthy discussion ended though because “No one was able to give him an answer.” But the seed was still planted. The answer the Pharisees gave was “accurate, but not adequate.” For you and I, we understand that Jesus was related to David by ancestry and also David’s Lord. We know that there is a both/and answer. Jesus was not correcting the Pharisees, he was encouraging them to think of the Messiah as more than their current expectations.

In a midrash, Jewish discourse, “interpretive disagreement was not tantamount to total theological incompatibility.” Jewish thought and theology have always been rich nourishment for the Jewish faith. While the gospels show Jesus mostly as a rebel, trouble maker, going against establishment, this text shows us that Jesus was dedicated to the same Scriptures as his discussion partners.

Surprisingly, I found a certain amount of hope in this text today. In the past weeks I have been painting Jesus’ enemies as cold and calculating, and devious as they try to trip up Jesus. The moral of the stories has been that Jesus doesn’t fall for their traps, manages to turn things around so that the Pharisees see the error of their ways. In my mind I have been building the scenario that will support the later scenes of Jesus betrayal and death.

The hope comes because out of the four questioning scenes of Jesus in the temple, one of the four was nothing more than confirmation of the deepest belief in all of the Jewish teachings. One of the four does not support the picture I have painted of the Pharisees.

We probably find groups like the Pharisees whenever we are deeply frustrated and saddened. I look to our national political authorities like the Pharisees, and I think “why aren’t you looking at things the right way!” The way that cares for constituents, cares for world peace, cares about making things better. Think about our national and world politics. Think about wars and intentional destruction. The humanitarian crises everywhere. Why do politicians eat up 21 day of a meager 45 days total, to come up with a budget? Why waste 21 days smooth talking candidates, when the death and suffering toll in Gaza and in Israel is growing exponentially by the day. Why paralyze the workings of our government with the people of Ukraine and Russia living and dying in a war zone.

It doesn’t have to be government. Maybe to you, Pharisees are insurance companies who keep delaying paperwork or approval for a surgery, a medicine, a plan for healing. Maybe to you, Pharisees are the rest of your extended family when you need to make a decision together that is difficult. Maybe the Pharisees are those who stand *in the way of* real justice, real love of neighbor.

The hope from today’s text is that there is still a 25% chance that there will be agreement on the most basic of values. What if there was hope that 25% of the time we would be able to agree that the world would be a peaceful place if everything we did was because in our hearts we “love the Lord our God with all of our heart and all of our soul, and all of our mind.” And if we “loved our neighbors as ourselves.”

What if we could grow that 25%? Even though the next few Sundays will consist of more Pharisee bashing, more parables, more judgment about the changes ahead during Jesus’ time in Jerusalem, we will end November’s lectionary with lessons about how to treat the least of these.

Our call is to be part of that 25%. Our call is to look for ways to reduce suffering, spread the love of God to the darkest places, to pray for even the smallest way to participate in uncovering the kingdom of heaven that is here on earth, and create the kingdom of heaven that is yet to be found.

Let us pray.

1Schaser, Nicholas J., Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota, United States

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30/commentary-on-matthew-2234-46-6>