

“Faith Made Plain”

Scriptures: Psalm 90: 1-6; 13-17
Matthew 22: 34-40

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Just read the headlines these days and you’ll see that the United States of America is being looked to by the rest of the world as either the standard-bearer of justice or the perpetrator of all evil, depending on who you ask. But if there’s one positive thing about America that we’re known for around the world, it’s our practicality. For nearly a century we’ve been the world’s leader when it comes to dreaming up practical, innovative approaches to life’s complex issues. If you’ve traveled to other parts of the world you’ve most likely been struck with how much other countries have adopted so many of our handy inventions. Everywhere you go these days, you see people not only talking on cell phones, but texting on I-Phones, as well as buying products advertised on American-style billboards touting products like Coca Cola, blue jeans and MacDonald’s.

I remember on a trip to Hungary back in the late ‘80’s, seeing crowds of people standing in line to get into the first MacDonald’s that had just opened there in Budapest that year. I couldn’t believe it: people actually taking numbers and waiting on line to get into a MacDonald’s, in shifts! I asked my Hungarian host why they would think fast food was worth standing in a line for that stretched all the way down the block, and very earnestly she responded: “Oh... the food is very quick and easy... everything is so clean, and individually wrapped.” This was just as the Communist era was coming to an end in Eastern Europe, and I had to realize that for people living in an authoritarian, tradition-bound culture, in a centrally planned economy, in a dysfunctional, drab, dreary and decaying world, to encounter something as bright, antiseptic and consumer-friendly as a MacDonald’s was a novel experience indeed!

Yes, we Americans take fast-food and so many of the conveniences we’ve become accustomed to for granted. Our society has come up with quick, easy answers to many of life’s complex problems, and some of them are actually good answers. Others are pretty questionable, and I hate to see the rest of the world parroting many of our mistakes. But ours is not the first era in which a society has needed to simplify and boil life’s questions down into a few easy solutions. Whenever there’ve been societies facing an over-complexity of issues, people have tried to come up with a simplified approach for daily living, with just a few basic answers to life’s thorny problems.

Such was the case even back in Jesus’ day. Never has there been a culture or religion with more daily rules and regulations to keep in mind than Judaism... 613, in fact, for pious, observant Jews to practice, day in and day out. We’re not talking just the Ten Commandments here; look at the first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Besides giving the story of Creation and early Hebrew history, these first five books of the Bible are chock full of laws, rules and regulations highlighting everything people of faith should do, down to the tiniest detail of everyday living. With 613 daily injunctions for the faithful to follow, the rabbis had more than a full time job of studying and interpreting the laws of the Torah,

and none them more so than the group of religious scholars called the Pharisees, with whom Jesus spars in our New Testament lesson.

The Pharisees were scholars devoted to studying God's word and to observing all the complex rules of Judaism. For them to encounter this maverick Galilean rabbi, Jesus, who ignored and even flouted many of their sacred rules, and who taught his listeners to do the same, was extremely threatening. How dare he trash the religious tradition they knew so well and held so dear? Who did he think he was anyway? God?

So, as we've seen in several of our recent gospel lessons we've been following in worship and lectionary study this Fall, the Pharisees tried to trip him up and discredit him as being an unorthodox heretic in front of the crowds on numerous occasions. In today's lesson, one of them asks him "Rabbi, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

What we need to know is that for the Jews of that day, and today as well, there is one law in the book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, that is held in highest esteem. It's called the "Shema," from Hebrew, meaning: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone." The "Shema" asserts the absolute sovereignty and uniqueness of God. It stands in stark contrast to the religions of the other peoples of the Near East and their belief in multiple gods, a god for this and a god for that. In so doing it gave the Jews a distinct identity from these Gentile peoples. And the "Shema" goes on to say: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words... in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise up. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."* (Deut. 6:6-9)

Could it be stated any more strongly? This is the central tenet of Judaism, the one thing that if all other rules were forgotten must still be observed. That's why we see some Orthodox Jews even today wearing little boxes, called phylacteries, bound by straps to their arms and foreheads. That's why the words are inscribed on signs or plaques on their doorways. They take the "Shema" literally, word for word. And they keep it close at hand, close to their hearts and close to their thoughts.

So did the Pharisees. And so did Jesus. When challenged by the Pharisees to name the central tenet of Judaism he dutifully repeated the "Shema." He was no fool, and he wasn't going to fall into their trap. He knew the "Shema" by heart, just like the Pharisee interrogating him did. Like any Jewish child, he had learned it in his childhood, and had heard it recited ever since. But Jesus then adapted it and added to it, and this is what makes his answer so revolutionary.

Notice that in his answer, he changed the term "with all your might" to "with all your mind..." In the Jewish practice of considering the Scriptures' meaning, it was acceptable to change a word here and there, as long as you didn't deviate from the passage's overall meaning. Jesus was giving the "Shema" a slight twist, which is intriguing for us to consider. "With all your mind" rather than just "with all your might"

means that the faithful hearer of the law should use his or her mind in deciding how and when to use all one's might in loving the one and only God. "A mind is a terrible thing to waste," to quote the United Negro College Fund motto... and Presbyterians put it this way: "You don't need to check your mind at the door when you come to church." Yes, our minds and our critical faculties of discernment and decision are to be exercised in the expression of our faith in God and our devotion to doing God's will.

"You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment," Jesus says. *"And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* Here he takes another quotation from the Pentateuch, from the book of Leviticus, Chapter 19 verse 18, and attaches it to the "Shema." Nothing out of line here in his "midrash," or interpretation, of the torah, just a new juxtaposition of two of its laws, giving an astounding new twist to Judaism's central concept. To love the Lord your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, as Jesus puts it, must be combined with loving your neighbor as you love yourself. Love of God cannot be practiced, cannot be real, in fact, without the practice of also loving one's neighbor as self.

What a challenge to the Pharisees! Clearly Jesus was critiquing their ivory tower approach to Judaism. They knew all the laws, all 613 injunctions for faithful daily living. They knew all the complexities of their religion. No one was better versed in the faith than they. But in spite of all this, they didn't really know God or obey the commandments, Jesus was saying, because they didn't practice the love of God in their relationships with other people. They held themselves above everyone else. They thought they were better than anyone else. And with that kind of posture, the love of God could hardly be expected to shine through them into the world around them.

I grew up in back east, in Pennsylvania. As a kid I had to study Pennsylvania history in seventh grade. Of course we learned that Pennsylvania was one of the original thirteen colonies which became the first states during the Revolutionary War. We also studied the geography of Pennsylvania and those original thirteen states, and can anyone tell me why Pennsylvania is nicknamed the "Keystone State?"

Well, if you know your map, you'll know that Pennsylvania lay at the middle of those original 13 states. You couldn't get to New York or New England from the South without going through Pennsylvania. And vice versa. You had to go through Pennsylvania from the North to get to the South. It was like a keystone in an archway: without it's special central position and shape, the whole thing would be disconnected and fall apart. The keystone is essential for the coherence of the entire structure.

Back in seventh grade we liked to think this made us Pennsylvanians the most important American state. Since we couldn't claim to be the First State – tiny Delaware holds that distinction – we claimed to be the most important one. Without us, the country couldn't hang together, and would have collapsed long ago. I delighted in reminding my culturally chauvinistic friends from New York City of this fact when some years later I went to college in New York State.

But returning to first century Judea, Jesus, as a Jewish rabbi with a critique of the religious status-quo, was putting his finger right on the central issue plaguing Judaism at the time... hyper-religiosity that had nothing to say regarding the lack of justice and compassion in society at large. Where Jesus differed from the Pharisees in his analysis of Judaism was that more than being a collection of laws and practices he saw faith in God as being a total way of life, permeating all our relationships in this world. As he or any of his hearers could recite from Psalm 90: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.” This was the point he was trying to make, that God is holy, and encompasses every dimension of life, not just the narrowly defined world of the sacred. And if this is so, we should live our entire lives accordingly.

“What is owed to God and neighbor is not the carrying out of a specific law,” says Biblical commentator Charles Cousar in his discussion of Jesus’ interchange with the Pharisees, “but a total approach to life. Love’s claim is without restriction.”¹ So if we’re to listen to this argument in our own era, where does our concern for living out God’s love and justice take us? Well, for starters here this month, it takes us downstairs, to Project Home. And from there it could lead us to advocate for the creation of more jobs with livable wages, and the creation of affordable housing options for those who currently have none. Go to Adult Enrichment today at 11:15, and you’ll hear our Housing Task Force folks describing big plans they have to help build a housing facility, right here in St. Paul. And from there, who knows where our faith in God might lead us?

“You shall love the Lord your God... This is the first and greatest commandment,” said Jesus. *“And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* This is the keystone of our faith. Without this central concept in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the rest of it falls apart. Without this simple combination of injunctions, our religion, whatever it may be, is worthless, and this church of ours is nothing more than an empty shell.

So, if all the many teachings of the faith we hold are too complex for us to keep in mind, if we forget everything else and have to boil it all down to one simple, practical answer, this one’s it... we’re called to love God *and* our neighbor, just as we’d love ourselves.

God and neighbor... the two are inseparable. Neither can stand without the other. Only linked together do they make a whole. It’s as plain and simple as that. Yes, it’s our faith made plain, by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

1. Cousar, Charles, in *Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, c. 1995, p. 542