

Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX

25 October 2020

Matthew 22:34-46

Isidor Isaac Rabi, a Nobel Prize winner in Physics, and one of the Developers of the atomic bomb, was once asked how he became a scientist. Rabi replied that every day after school his mother would ask him about his school day. She wasn't so much interested in what he had learned that day, but how he conducted himself. She always inquired, "Did you ask a good question today?" "Asking good questions," Rabi said, "made me become a scientist."

I believe the difference between a good question and a bad question is the issue of intent. Many people ask Jesus good questions that seek to un-vail or uncover the truth. These people seek to learn, to understand, to advance their knowledge of something. The question is made for the sake of truth and it starts as curiosity, inquisitiveness, and interest. Some people ask Jesus questions not for the sake of learning anything, but to trip, to test, or to catch him in some incongruence of thought. The purpose here is not to advance their knowledge of the truth, but rather to destroy their enemy.

Jesus has been dealing with enemies throughout Chapter 22 of Matthew. Last week we read the famous passage about taxes (22:17), which starts with an alliance between the Pharisees and the Herodians, unlikely friends united for the purpose of defeating a common enemy. Right after that passage we have the Sadducees asking a question about marriage and giving into marriage in heaven (22:27). Today we have a Pharisee Lawyer asking Jesus about the greatest commandment (22:34). None of these questions was asked for noble reasons or for the sake of truth, but rather out of malicious intent. Jesus, however, is able to answer each of these questions successfully by quoting from Jewish Scripture. In doing so, he reveals to them the truth and fullness of God's word and provides a fresh interpretation of the Scriptures which is as applicable to First Century Palestine as it is to Twenty First Century America.

Even though this question is asked for malicious intent, it is a question worth asking. Which is the greatest commandment? When the Pharisee asks this question he expects an answer from the book of Deuteronomy, perhaps, Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." This is the greatest Jewish command. The good Jew is to love God above all things and people. This love manifested itself in obedience to the Jewish Instruction we call *Torah*, which we call the 10

Commandments (and the hundreds of smaller commands derived from them). There were other groups, like the Sadducees, that emphasized a different answer to the question. Their answer focused more on Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." For this group, love of neighbor is the primary commandment and purpose of the Law. God gave us his law to help us love each other better.

Once again, as we have seen in the last several weeks, Jesus is in a real pickle. If he affirms that the Shema is the first and greatest commandment he risks upsetting the Sadducees, who are the humanists, the intellectuals, and some of the most influential people of the day. If he affirms that the love of people, according to Leviticus 19, is the most important command, he risks upsetting the Pharisees who are the teachers of the Law, the Rabbis and the temple authorities. Each group has a partial answer to the question and only half of the truth. In reality these two commandments were never meant to be opposite each other.

Jesus' answer places both commands side by side into one cohesive and comprehensive answer. Both commands are "alike," they are equally as important. They cannot be separated, since God is love and since he is the lover of people, we can't love God fully without loving our neighbors as ourselves. Now, we don't have the choice to have a purely spiritual and ethereal love for God that is divorced from humanity. Our love for God has a context and that context is our world, our everyday life, our very own communities. One without the other is incomplete. Love of God and love of neighbor are two sides of the same coin.

Love is the answer. Now, since love is the answer, we must understand what love meant in first century Palestine. We all know that there are three different words for love at the time of Jesus. One is erotic or romantic love (Eros), one is brotherly or sisterly love (Phileo --you may think of Philadelphia), and the last one is communal love (Agapao --you may know the word agape). The word Jesus is using here is the last word. We are talking about communal love, not erotic love, and not even the kind of love you have for your children or your spouse or close relatives, that love is assumed. We seldom have to be reminded to love our children.

The type of love Jesus is talking about here is the type of love you have for your kin group, your tribe, or your community. It has very little to do with strong emotions or feelings. It has very little to do with what we call today love, in the Hollywood sense of the world. It is not individualistic, but rather group directed. It is not necessarily an emotion, but an act of the will. It is a choice you make for

others. When Christ says, "Love your neighbor" he is not talking just about the lady who lives next door. He is talking about everyone in your community, every person he places in your life. It means that you will treat others with respect, that you will endeavor to treat others fairly, that you will seek the well-being of others, that you will communicate truthfully with others, that you will not gossip, that you will not use others as stepping stones to get to higher ground, that you will treat others with civility, etc.

This type of love is as much a matter of the heart as it is a matter of the mind. In a very real way, this type of love requires decision-making. It is a choice. You can choose to love others or you can choose not to love others. Of course, today Jesus says that choosing to love others and, in fact, loving them is as important as loving God. There is a part of this command to love others, however, that we often forget. The command to love others ends with "as you love yourself." The self is not to get lost in the act of loving others. You are not to love others while totally neglecting yourself, willingly becoming a victim for the sake of love, allowing others to use you for the sake of love, letting others manipulate and control you for the sake of love, accepting abuse as a normal behavior for the sake of love... If you are doing this, you are not loving yourself.

My friends love of God and love of neighbor is only possible because we have been loved this way by God through his Son, Jesus Christ. He, who died for us on the cross out of love, has shown us the way. With him in our hearts and in our lives this type of love is possible. I pray today that each of you may love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might, and your neighbors and yourselves. Amen!