

**Sermon for Sunday, October 26, 2008**  
**The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25)**  
**By Tim Ljunggren**

**First Lesson: Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

**Psalm: Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17**

**Second Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8**

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

*“You shall love the Lord 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.”*

Today, we hear Jesus being asked yet another question by one of those pesky Pharisees—  
“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

The person who asked Jesus the question is considered by most scholars to be an expert on Mosaic law; this is the fourth time that Jesus has been challenged in this tension-filled twenty-second chapter of Matthew, and once again Jesus is up to the task.

Jesus' answer is not original. It is, in fact, the citation of two texts, one from Deuteronomy, the other from Leviticus. "‘You shall love the Lord 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’" (22:37-39). Jesus' answer signals his, and perhaps Matthew's, respect for the law and tradition. It also suggests that the issue is not so much finding the right answer--it's been there all along--as obeying the commandment. It's less a question of information than formation, less a matter of knowledge than obedience.

Things change in the fourth and final exchange. Jesus himself poses a question. "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Frankly, the Pharisees' question about the greatest commandment seems both more useful and more interesting. "Whose son is the Messiah?" hardly seems a burning issue.

The Pharisees do not hesitate to answer. The Messiah is "the son of David." Their response suggests that the Messiah is a known quantity, has a place in the line of succession, and fits into the scheme of things--or at least into *their* scheme of things. But

Jesus is not finished. Quoting the 110th Psalm, Jesus finds David referring to the Messiah as "his Lord," and asks, "If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" (22:45).

The question is a kind of riddle. I wonder if Jesus smiled as he asked it. Riddles are great levelers. So long as you puzzle for answers according to acquired, predictable and "right" ways of thinking, you will be stumped, as were the Pharisees. "No one was able to give [Jesus] an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions" (22:46). We could say that Jesus "won." But I suspect that, as with riddles and parables, the real point has something to do with different ways of knowing. Maybe Jesus is saying that the important thing is not so much having the right answer as changing direction or orientation. St. Gregory of Nyssa observed, "Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything." Jesus seems to be trying to usher the Pharisees toward wonder.

*Wonder*—what a wonderful word! Many times, we would all like to do without wonder, wouldn't we? We want things in "black and white" or, at the very least, we want to hold on to our "right" answers—the answers we deem as right. Jesus, however, doesn't seem to be too concerned with what we think is "right" or "wrong," "black" or "white," "up" or "down."

No, Jesus simply wants to give us the opportunity to think—to wonder.

I don't know if you're anything like me, but I distrust people who seem to have all of the answers. Of course, I also distrust people who point out to other people that, not only do they have all of the answers, but if we only did it *their* way, the world might be a much better place to live in.

Churches are notorious breeding grounds for such people. The quest to be "right" supersedes everything else, and the task of wondering about God and our relationship to God is always put on a backburner. We seek answers to our question, just as the Pharisee in today's Gospel lesson did: we seek answers that we can understand, and we won't stand for anything less.

Of course, Jesus doesn't give us that, does he? Just the opposite: Jesus speaks in parables, in riddles, in reverse questions, in the resurrectional language of a God who would much rather have us wonder about loving our neighbors as ourselves rather than solving those thorny theological questions that I often encountered in seminary. Those thorny theological questions are certainly interesting—I'll give you that—but they don't amount to a hill of beans when it comes to wondering about the true mind of God—and then acting on that wonder.

“No one was able to give [Jesus] an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.”

You see, Jesus isn't into playing games; Jesus is more interesting in how you treat your neighbor, how you love yourself (and, believe me, if you don't love yourself in the way that God wants you to, it'll certainly show up in the way you treat your neighbor), and how you love and serve God.

Nothing else really matters, does it?

Awhile back, there was a Gallup poll on what makes churches both happy and productive—what makes churches feel as if they're actually doing the will of God. You know what this poll found? It's not surprising, really—those congregations that were the happiest, the most ministry-filled, were the ones who paid attention to personal relationships. There was a decided lack of conflict in these various churches, simply because everyone was far too busy to be pointing fingers, being negative, and/or placing blame on anyone else. There was simply too much to do, and there was simply too much to wonder about. Besides, everyone in these churches was too busy loving themselves in such a way as to reach out and love others as well. They just couldn't help it.

The venom was gone from these wonderful churches, and it was replaced with a sincere openness to God and where God was leading them.

Wow. Imagine that!

Here at the Church of the Incarnation, maybe our job isn't to worry, or to gnash teeth, or to infuse negativity into the fabric of our parish life together. Maybe,—and and maybe this is a radical idea—just *maybe* we're called not to find the right answers, but to simply learn how to ask the right questions. Maybe, just maybe, we're called to wonder about God rather than wondering about our own agendas.

Hmmm—I wonder...I just wonder. ...

Amen.

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