

PENTECOST 19

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MATTHEW 22: 34-46

GEORGE THOMSEN

THE GOSPEL LESSON LAST WEEK RECALLED ONE OF THE MANY INCIDENTS WHERE JEWISH LEADERS ATTEMPTED A LITTLE TRICKERY TO QUESTION JESUS' AUTHORITY. FIRST IT WAS THE PHARISEES AND HERODIANS ON THE MATTER OF PAYING TAXES TO ROME. EVEN THOUGH THE TWO PARTIES DISAGREED ON POLITICS, THEY WERE UNITED IN THEIR ANIMOSITY TOWARD JESUS.

NEXT CAME A QUESTION FROM THE SADDUCEES. THEY THEMSELVES DIDN'T BELIEVE IN A RESURRECTION AND SO LAID OUT A TEST QUESTION ABOUT A WOMAN AND HER SEVEN LATE HUSBANDS.

JESUS ANSWERED HIS QUESTIONERS SO WISELY AND INCISIVELY THAT A LAWYER IN THE CROWD, SEEING HOW JESUS HAD SILENCED HIS CRITICS, DECIDED TO SPEAK UP.

ONE OF THE MOST HOTLY DEBATED TOPICS OF THE DAY DEALT WITH THE COMMANDMENTS. OF THE COMMANDMENTS GOD HAS GIVEN, WHICH WERE MOST IMPORTANT? WHICH WERE THE GREATEST? UNLIKE THE PHARISEES, HERODIANS AND SADDUCEES BEFORE HIM, THIS LAWYER WASN'T LOOKING TO PUT JESUS ON THE SPOT. HE WASN'T INTERESTED IN FINDING EVIDENCE AGAINST HIM OR IN MAKING FUN OF HIS TEACHING. NO, HE SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN SINCERE WHEN HE ASKED, "WHICH COMMANDMENT IN THE LAW IS THE GREATEST?"

REMEMBERING HOW YOU AND I WERE VERY LIKELY TAUGHT THE ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION AS CHILDREN, WE CAN STILL APPRECIATE HOW DEBATABLE THAT QUESTION WAS BEFORE JESUS ANSWERED IT SO DEFINITELY.

JEWISH RABBIS COUNTED 613 COMMANDMENTS IN THE LAW ALONE! HOW DO YOU BEGIN TO RANK THAT MANY COMMANDMENTS? BY THE TIME YOU'D READ THE 83<sup>RD</sup> YOU WOULD LIKELY HAVE FORGOTTEN WHAT THE 12<sup>TH</sup> WAS.

TO MAKE THE TASK EASIER, COMMANDMENTS WERE GROUPED INTO BROAD CATEGORIES DEALING WITH SACRIFICES, THE SABBATH AND CIRCUMCISION. OTHER CATEGORIES DEALT WITH WORSHIP, THE TORAH AND EXPRESSIONS OF LOVE. THE QUESTION THOUGH REMAINED THE SAME. WHICH COMMANDMENT, REPRESENTING ONE OF THE CATEGORIES, WAS THE GREATEST?

ALTHOUGH INTELLECTUALLY CHALLENGING, THE QUESTION WAS EVEN MORE IMPORTANT SPIRITUALLY. IF YOU BELIEVED YOUR ETERNAL DESTINY HINGED ON HOW WELL YOU KEPT THE COMMANDMENTS, YOU'D WANT TO BE CERTAIN THAT YOU WERE KEEPING THE MOST IMPORTANT ONES AT THE VERY LEAST.

AS HE OFTEN DID WHEN QUESTIONED, JESUS WENT BACK TO THE MOSAIC LAW FOR HIS ANSWERS....NOT JUST ONE BUT TWO OF THEM. FIRST, HE QUOTED FROM DEUTERONOMY 6: 4-5 THAT ORDERS ONE TO

LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR BEING. IF YOU COMPARE WHAT MOSES WROTE TO WHAT JESUS SAID, YOU DISCOVER THAT THE LORD CHANGED THE WORDING SLIGHTLY. MOSES SPOKE OF LOVING GOD WITH ALL ONE'S HEART, SOUL AND MIGHT. JESUS CHANGED THE WORD "MIGHT" TO "MIND" IN HIS ANSWER. "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND. " HE WAS TRYING TO DRAW ATTENTION TO OUR ENTIRE BEING WHICH IS TO BE USED AS WE OFFER AND PROCLAIM OUR LOVE OF GOD.

WHEN WE START TRYING TO DELINEATE EXACTLY WHAT LOVE ENTAILS, WHAT ACTIONS IT WILL PRODUCE AND THOSE IT WILL PROHIBIT WE FALL INTO A KIND OF RITUALISTIC RELIGION THAT HAS LITTLE TO DO WITH A LOVING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ALMIGHTY. THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT IS ONE THAT CALLS US TO A LOVE FOR GOD THAT PERMEATES EVERY ASPECT OF OUR BEING. SUCH LOVE SHOULD AFFECT EVERYTHING ABOUT US AND THAT IS THE POINT THAT JESUS IS MAKING.

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT, ACCORDING TO JESUS, IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT. QUOTING FROM LEVITICUS 19: 18, HE SAID, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." PREVIOUSLY JESUS HAD CHANGED A WORD WHEN QUOTING MOSES BUT IN THIS CASE HE LEFT OUT AN ENTIRE LINE. THE ORIGINAL WRITING BY MOSES SEEMS LIMITED AND DEALS PRIMARILY WITH HOW WE SHOULD ACT WHEN WRONGED. BY LEAVING OUT A LINE, JESUS MADE THE COMMANDMENT MORE ALL-INCLUSIVE. WE ARE TO LOVE OUR

NEIGHBOR, NOT ONLY WHEN WE HAVE BEEN WRONGED, BUT AT ALL TIMES.

SOUNDS EASY ENOUGH, DOESN'T IT? AFTER ALL, YOU HEAR THE WORD 'LOVE' JUST ABOUT EVERYWHERE THESE DAYS. IN OUR TIMES LOVE IS ALL ABOUT FEELINGS. WE SPEAK OF PEOPLE "FALLING IN LOVE" AND WE SING SONGS LIKE "ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE". IT'S LIKE SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS THAT WE HAVE NO CONTROL OVER. WE'RE THE PASSIVE RECIPIENTS OR EVEN THE VICTIMS OF OUR FEELINGS THAT'S WHY THE CLASSIC EXPRESSION OF LOVE THROUGH THE AGES HAS BEEN CUPID WITH HIS ARROW, SHOOTING PEOPLE SO THAT THEY HOPELESSLY LOSE CONTROL OF THEIR FEELINGS.

THE CATCH, OF COURSE, IS THAT HUMAN FEELINGS ARE NOTORIOUSLY UNRELIABLE. THEY CAN CHANGE AT THE DROP OF A HAT. LIVES GET PULLED AND STRETCHED, AND PEOPLE CHANGE. A RELATIONSHIP BUILT PRIMARILY ON FEELING IS BUILT ON SAND.

NEITHER THE GOD OF MOSES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, NOR JESUS IN THE NEW SEEMS TO HAVE ANY INTEREST IN FEELINGS OF LOVE. "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD," SAYS GOD; "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," SAYS JESUS. LOVE IS SOMETHING THAT JESUS BELIEVED COULD BE COMMANDED. WE ARE TO LOVE GOD WITH OUR HEARTS AND MINDS AND SOULS AND OUR NEIGHBORS AS OURSELVES. THIS LOVE ISN'T SOMETHING THAT IS MEANT TO GIVE US WARM, FUZZY FEELINGS.

LOVE IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS IS A PRACTICE, A SKILL, A DEMANDING DISCIPLINE. IT DEMANDS AN ARDUOUS JOURNEY OUT OF OUR SELF-ABSORPTION INTO CARING FOR THE WELL-BEING OF ANOTHER. IF WE WANT TO BECOME FULL HUMAN BEINGS, WE MUST SLOWLY, CAREFULLY LEARN THE ART OF LOVING.

FOR JESUS, OUR NEIGHBOR IS THE ONE WHO NEEDS US, WHETHER THAT PERSON IS ACROSS THE DINNER TABLE, IN THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR, OR ACROSS PORT TOWNSEND OR THE WORLD. YOU WILL REMEMBER THAT IN LUKE, CHAPTER 10, JESUS WAS ASKED, BY ANOTHER LAWYER, “AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?” HIS ANSWER WAS THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN, THE ONE WHO SHOWED MERCY TO THE PERSON IN NEED. LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS ISN’T ABOUT WARM FEELINGS BUT ABOUT UNSENTIMENTAL, CONCRETE ACTS OF KINDNESS.

THE ULTIMATE ISSUE FOR ALL OF US IS WHETHER WE EVER LEARN TO LOVE OUR GOD-NEIGHBOR. WORSHIPING GOD IS WHERE WE BEGIN. WE COME TO PLACES SUCH AS THIS TO OPEN OUR MINDS AND SPIRITS TO THE GOD WHO MADE US AND LOVES US. BUT THAT ALONE IS ONLY A START. IT SHOWS US THE THINGS THAT COUNT.....COMPASSION, FORGIVENESS, ACTIVE LOVE. AND IT OPENS US TO RECEIVE CHRIST’S SPIRIT AND LOVE THAT MAKES THESE THINGS POSSIBLE. ST. PAUL’S IS MEANT TO BE A SCHOOL FOR LOVE; A PLACE WHERE WE CAN PRACTICE THE SKILLS AND ART OF LOVING AND THEN PROPEL OURSELVES OUT IN SERVICE TO OUR GOD AND

NEIGHBOR, AS LAST WEEK'S COLLECT SUGGESTED, "TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER BOLDLY."

I WOULD LIKE TO CLOSE WITH A POEM, WRITTEN BY ANDREW DAUGHTERS, AN EPISCOPAL PRIEST, THAT I HAD THE PLEASURE OF KNOWING SOME YEARS AGO.

THE DAY I LEARNED TO LET "YOU" BE  
A MORE IMPORTANT WORD THAN "ME",  
I LEARNED TO LIVE MORE HAPPILY,  
I LEARNED TO LOVE.

THE DAY I LEARNED THAT SACRIFICE  
FOR THOSE I LOVE IS WORTH THE PRICE,  
AND BEING LESS WILL STILL SUFFICE,  
I LEARNED TO LOVE.

THE DAY THAT I LEARNED HOW TO GIVE.  
AND, MORE IMPORTANT, TO FORGIVE,  
MY LIFE BECAME AFFIRMATIVE,  
I LEARNED TO LOVE.

FOR ON THAT DAY I DID PERCEIVE  
THAT WE MUST GIVE IF WE'D RECEIVE.  
AND THAT'S WHY ADAM NEEDED EVE.  
TO LEARN TO LOVE.