

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 26, 2008
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Brook Thelander

Exodus 22:21-27
Psalm 1
I Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46

Our Gospel lesson today once again finds opponents of Jesus trying to trap him by posing questions to him which would get him into trouble. This has been happening for several chapters now, and Jesus is most likely getting tired of it.

After having dealt with the Sadducees, Jesus now is confronted by the Pharisees and their questions. One of their experts asks Jesus, “teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?”

On the surface, this question appears innocuous, and even substantive. But these questions being posed to Jesus are not innocuous because of the poisonous motives from which they arise. The Pharisees and Sadducees do not ask these questions because they are trying to seek truth and mutual understanding. Their questions of Jesus are like “tiny terrorists” that are wired to explode. Jesus is not meant to *answer* their questions -- he is meant to *trip* over them, and in the process, to blow himself to kingdom come.

The questions, on the surface, appear to be innocent and endearing. But at their core they are petty and legalistic. They are petty and legalistic because they

lack something vital, something basic to who Jesus is and what he is about. What could that *something* be?

Using great restraint, Jesus answers their question, and ours. He says: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind. But don’t stop there. Love your neighbor as yourself. For on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus’ questioners here are concerned, as we often are in the church, with theological speculation. Jesus, however, is concerned more with real relationship, the relationship that began at Sinai where God in love embraced a people and called on them to live in love with Him and with one another. This relationship of love was characterized not by sentiment, but by complete commitment to the well-being of the other. It dressed up in work clothes, and expressed itself in every aspect of life.

This love relationship is, for Jesus, the linchpin of the whole enterprise, and everything else is derived from it. Paul McCartney and John Lennon may have sung, “All you need is love,” but they were not voicing anything new. Burt Bacharach may have penned, “what the world needs now is love, sweet love,” but he was not the original author of that thought. For love is of God, and in the end, Christianity is about love. If we don’t get that, we don’t understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus, no matter how doctrinally sound we may be.

I got to thinking this week about Jesus' words, about his call to come back to this love relationship as the core of Christian faith. I began to think about some key Christian doctrines, and how these teachings find their source in this love relationship.

For example, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity shows us a dynamic relationship between the three Persons of the Godhead, a relationship that is marked by mutual love. Eastern Orthodox theologians describe this love relationship as a "dance," using the word *perichoresis*.

Or consider the doctrine of the Incarnation. When the apostle John describes God sending His Son to the world for our salvation, do you recall what was behind God's gracious action? John tells us:

...for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son...

And again, John says, "this is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins" (I John 4:10).

Those words of John not only speak of the doctrine of the incarnation, but also of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement. In a similar vein, the apostle Paul speaks to the Romans and says, "No one is likely to die for a good person, though someone might be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great *love* for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners" (Rom. 5:7-8).

I was reminded again this week that at the heart of Scripture, at the heart of salvation history, at the heart of Jesus' life and ministry and death, is the heart of God beating with love for you and for me. Responding to that love, and reflecting that love back to others, is the essence of what it means to follow Jesus.

Looking at church history, one might be tempted to conclude that the greatest commandment has sometimes been, "Believe certain doctrines about God, Christ, and the Church, and articulate them with pinpoint accuracy" rather than "love God, love your neighbor."

And I would be the first to tell you today that as followers of Jesus, *what* we believe is important. The New Testament writers speak forcefully about the need to guard what has been entrusted to us, to live in faithfulness to the *content* of the apostles' teaching, and to pass the apostolic faith on to others.

But when the day comes that you and I stand before God, and our lives are examined, the important question put to us will not be, "How much did you know?"

The question put to us in that day will be, "How deep and pure was your love?" The question asked of us will be, "what did your love for God look like when it put on work clothes?" What did you *do* with what you *knew*?

When the apostle John had his visionary experience we know as the Revelation, the risen Jesus speaks to the church at Ephesus with these words:

I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting. But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen from your first love! [Rev. 2:2-5]

The church at Ephesus was orthodox to the core. But they had lost sight of the fact that the content of the faith is always lived within the context of a love relationship.

Love the Lord your God:
 Completely
 Supremely
 Sacrificially
 Wholeheartedly

Love your neighbor:
 Compassionately
 Empathetically
 Generously
 Impartially

Everything rises and falls, not on what we know, but on how we *live* and *love* what we know.

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, come not just with faith, but come with LOVE. Receive the love of Christ in these tokens of bread and wine. And go forth with thanksgiving as you allow his great love to put on work clothes and to touch others through you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.