

Proper 25, Year A

October 26, 2014

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'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."

“When Frank was nine or ten, he found himself in an argument with his younger sister. Before long, arguing turned to pushing and shoving, and pushing and shoving then turned to hitting. Just as Frank had his sister pinned on the ground, fist raised in the air, his mother came into the room. ‘Franklin,’ she bellowed, ‘stop that!’ At that, as Frank would tell it, he turned his head toward his mother and said as only a young boy can, ‘She’s my sister, and I can do anything I want to her.’ At which point Frank’s mother swooped across the room, towered over him, and said, ‘She’s my daughter -- *no you can't!*’” (True story told by David Lose, *Dear Working Preacher*)

That story is a story about love and law: the law laid down by a loving parent as a way of protecting her children from one another; the law as an expression of that parent’s love; the law as an expression of the loving parent’s desire that her children love one another in the same way that she loves them. The story is also about a child’s defiant will to disobey that law. In short, it’s the story of the whole Bible. In the Bible story, God is the loving mother, and God’s law is good: it expresses God’s desire to protect her children from one another, AND it expresses God’s desire that her children love one another in the same way God loves.

And yet I’m afraid that many of us modern-day American Christians (myself included) have developed a rather negative attitude toward the Biblical Law, thinking that since Jesus disobeyed the Sabbath laws and dietary laws, he must not have thought the Law was necessary anymore. The fact that he is constantly opposing the experts in the Jewish Law (like the lawyer in today’s Gospel) must mean that **Jesus** opposes the Law, too. What we forget, however, is that the Law is God’s gift to us – just like Frank’s mother’s law was a gift both to Frank and his sister. “She’s my daughter – no, you can’t!” You can’t harm your sister at will, you can’t hoard everything, you can’t own everything, because those kinds of actions do not reflect the spirit of God implanted in our hearts – that divine image within us that the Law was intended to protect and nurture.

And nowhere in the New Testament is the Jewish Law **more** valued than in Matthew’s Gospel, which we have been reading this past year in our Sunday lectionary. For it is only in Matthew, and not in any of the other Gospels, that Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill....” (Matt. 5:17)

Jesus’ answer to the lawyer in today’s Gospel – his statement of the Two Great Commandments – shows how seriously Jesus took the Law. And Jesus’ answer would have been deemed by the

lawyers of his day as a wise and unassailable interpretation of the Torah. Indeed, in Luke's version of this story, this summary of the Law – love God with your whole being and your neighbor as your self – is put on the lips of a lawyer, and Jesus agrees with the lawyer's summary. Now if Jesus and the lawyers agree on the heart of the Torah, where's the problem? The problem lies in the fact that while these same lawyers and Pharisees *knew* the Law and taught the Law, they did not **live** the Law. In next week's Gospel, Jesus says to the crowds and to his disciples, "The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law are experts in the Law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their **example**. For they don't practice what they teach." (Matt. 23:1-3)

What was important to Jesus was not just *knowing* the law, but *doing* the law. "For it is not by *hearing* the Law that people are put right with God," St. Paul wrote, "but by **doing** what the Law commands." (Romans 2:13) In the *next* chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you **ignore** the more *important* aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." (Matt. 23:23-24)

What about you and I? Is there a part of us that is like the scribes and Pharisees, straining at gnats while swallowing camels? Oh, we may attend church each Sunday, may even give away a tenth of our income. We may know the Bible backwards and forwards, read it every day; recite our prayers, know our liturgy by heart, know all the right theology. But what about the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faith? After all, in the Biblical sense, "loving God and your neighbor" is not a matter of having warm feelings about them. "Love, you see," writes Professor David Lose, "isn't an interior emotion, affection, or attraction in the Bible. It's an action, a behavior, a commitment to seek the good of another no matter what."

But if Jesus is telling us in these Scriptures that loving God and neighbor involves action, behavior, and commitment to seek the good of another no matter what, Jesus is also aware that right actions *can* be done **without** love. He warns us in his Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them..." (Matthew 6:1) Doing the right things only to build up our ego and make us feel good about ourselves is not loving God and neighbor, either. "Love is also an interior reality," writes Fr. John Shea, "and so there is a stress on the inner space **from** which an action comes." (*On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 306) Is the right action coming from our ego, a desire to prove to ourselves and others that we are good? Or is the action coming from a loving heart filled with the Spirit of God, in union with the risen Christ? In the Old Testament, God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah: "The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts." (31:33) I think that's a way of saying that it is not just the *written* law to love God and neighbor that is important – it's also crucial **where** obedience to these laws comes from, crucial that action flow forth from our heart-space and not our ego.

Father Shea tells the following story:

One day a certain man hurriedly headed out the door for work. In his path was his three-year-old son playing with blocks. The man patted the boy on the head, stepped over him, opened the door, and went outside. Halfway down the walk a guilt bomb exploded within him.

“What am I doing?” he thought to himself. “I am ignoring my son. I never play with him. He’ll be old before I know it.” In the background of his thoughts he heard the pounding rhythms of “Cat’s in the Cradle,” Harry Chapin’s ballad to lost fatherhood. He returned to the house and sat down with his son and began to build blocks.

After two minutes, the boy said, “Daddy, why are you mad at me?”

“It is not only **what** we do that counts but *from where* we do it,” Fr. Shea notes. “Our actions come from different places inside us. These different places affect the quality and effectiveness of what we do. We may think the inside is of little consequence as we push into the outer world, but it can change the impact of our actions. ‘**Steeling** ourselves’ and doing something is not the same as ‘**opening** ourselves’ and doing the same thing. Playing blocks out of guilt is not the same as playing blocks out of love, and the difference is quickly spotted, even by three-year-olds, especially by three-year-olds. Doing something because it is expected and doing something from the heart are two different experiences. Perhaps that is why Jesus, in Matthew’s Gospel, insists that we forgive our brothers and sisters *from our heart* (see Matt 18:21-35, esp. v. 35).” (*Ibid.*, p. 308)

Perhaps this week each of us can be more conscious, more aware of whether our thoughts, words and actions follow the Law of God and the teachings of Jesus. It is not that we don’t *know* the teachings of Jesus. Many of us know Jesus’ teachings so well that we could recount them in our sleep. The question is: Do we **live** them? “Now that you *know* these things,” Jesus says in John’s Gospel, “you will be blessed if you put them into practice.” (John 13:17) The blessing is not in the knowing, but in the doing. Look over your past week, and ask yourself: “Did I follow those teachings of Jesus which I could recount in my sleep – love my enemies, turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, die to myself in order to live, forgive 70 x 7, detach from my possessions, care for the poor?” And if you did these things, followed Jesus’ teachings, ask yourself one more question: “From which space within me did those actions originate – my ego, or my heart?”

AMEN