

Proper 25A 2020 Sermon

October 25, 2020

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."

The Pharisees gather together, and "One of them, an expert in religious law, tries to trap [Jesus]..." Matthew 22:35 (NLT) In *last week's* Gospel, the Pharisees *also* tried to trap Jesus, with the question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?"

The way in which the Pharisees in *today's* Gospel try to trap Jesus is by asking him which of the 613 Jewish Laws was the greatest – a question which Jewish scholars had argued about for centuries. The Pharisees' intent is a malevolent one: to trip Jesus up and cause him to fall. But Jesus responds by citing God's commandments to **love** – the very *opposite* of malevolence. "Love God with your whole being, and your neighbor as yourself," Jesus says.

As we enter into the last days of this election season, I couldn't help but compare the malevolent intent of the Pharisees to trip Jesus up and make him fall with the various political candidates and parties trying to trip up *their* opponents and make *them* fall. As if the only way one can "win" is by making another fall.

That seems to be the overriding consciousness of *this* world: a mindset which separates *this* from *that*, in or out, Democrat or Republican, pro-mask vs. anti-mask, and on and on. "Any antagonistic action merely creates an 'equal and opposite reaction,'" writes Richard Rohr. "The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better... Just do it better yourself, and don't waste any time criticizing others!"

This past week, Canon City Mayor Ashley Smith spoke about those in our community who were so opposed to the coronavirus restrictions coming from the Health Department that they threatened the lives of the Director of our Fremont County Health Department and her family, and poisoned and killed some dogs owned by others in the field of public health. And I wonder if we don't tend to think that such adversarial consciousness, this divisiveness and acrimony in which we find ourselves, is the norm? We *expect* political candidates to focus their energies on tripping up their opponents and making them fall. We take for granted that our political identities will color **everything**, including our responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic. We accept this as simply "reality" – these conflicting opinions and allegiances and preferences and judgments which result in malevolent thoughts, intentions, and actions toward others.

But, my friends, this is **not** Reality; not **God's** Reality – which is the only REAL Reality there is! When we don't live in **God's** Reality, God's Kingdom, we are living in a false construct of our own making.

Mayor Smith spoke from a place within **God's** Realty when she pleaded with us residents of Canon City to be kind and understanding to each other “as everyone trudges through this unsettling time together.” Business guru Stephen Covey spoke from a place within **God's** Reality when he wrote, “When one side benefits more than the other, that's a win-lose situation. To the winner it might look like success for a while, but in the long run, it breeds resentment and distrust... In the long run, if it isn't a win for both of us, we both lose.” And Abraham Lincoln spoke from a place within **God's** Reality when, facing the daunting task of uniting a nation torn apart by Civil War, he said in his Second Inaugural Address, “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds.”

“‘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.”

Can you and I live within **that** reality? The Reality of God's love, God's Kingdom – the only **Eternal** Reality?

AMEN