

Jim Gill

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“Great Commandment”

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 Matthew 22:35-44 I Thessalonians 2:1-8

This morning's lesson is the LAST account of Jesus' opponents trying to trap him with a question. It seems like the last several weeks it's been one trap after another. It's like tag team wrestling. Jesus has successfully thwarted the attempts to trick him by the conservative Pharisees, the liberal Herodians, and then the even more liberal Sadducees. So now the Pharisees, call out the big gun. They get the law professor who taught them all and send him forth into the fray. Hear the word of God, the gospel of our Lord from Matthew 22:35-40

Let's pray. Lord, we can't imagine how or why you love us. Our love is so often conditional, but your love is unconditional. We say, "I'll love you if or I love you because, but you love us in spite of. You've given us Laws to know how to love, but it is only through the power of your Holy Spirit that we can find the strength and the ability. As we focus on your command to us to love, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, our Lord our Rock and our Redeemer.

Alas, last night was not to be for the Astros. It reminded me of a story of a little league game when the coach gave the sign for a bunt. The batter instead swung away and flied out. The coach came to the batter and asked, "Didn't you see me give the bunt sign?" The kid said, "Yes I saw it. But I didn't think you meant it."

He didn't take it as a command. He took it as a suggestion.

On October 31, 1517, an Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther had 95 suggestions. He marched up to the castle church door in Wittenberg, Germany, where he was on the university faculty, and posted 95 theses or propositions concerning church policy and practice he proposed for debate. All he was hoping for was a debate. Apparently those he hoped to debate took his 95 suggestions as commands.

In his day the church door was the community bulletin board — notices and advertisements were regularly placed there, just as they are on the bulletin board today at the grocery store or Facebook or Craigslist today. The reason he chose October 31, was that then and now, that is the date for All Hallows Eve, the day before All Saints Day. That was a day that saw church attendance in medieval Europe at its peak as people gathered to remember the dearly departed. Luther knew that timing is everything, and posting his grievances in that place on that day would be certain to attract a good audience. It worked. It started a debate that, in many ways, has continued for the last 500 years.

Luther's immediate distress was over the sale of indulgences or "pardons" for sin offered by the church. His own study of scripture had convinced him of the truth

of Paul's statement in the epistle to the Romans: "We maintain that we are justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28), and Ephesians 2:8-9, We are saved by grace through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. "

Luther's new understanding clashed sharply with the church's position that people are saved by faith and good works. They believed that God was willing and able to forgive sins, but God required some religious ritual or good deed, some act of penance, to prove that the sinner was truly sorry. If the forgiven sinner died before getting the slate wiped clean, he or she had to spend time in purgatory, a place of purifying pain, until the spiritual obligations are met or someone paid their way out for them.

As we all know, the most sensitive nerve in a person's body is the one attached to the pocketbook. Indulgences had been used for hundreds of years to finance the work of the church. Indulgences had paid for the Crusades. Now, the pope was using them as a "Capital Campaign" to complete construction of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

Luther did not expect anything remarkable to happen now other than a scholarly debate. But his protest took on a life of its own. The people in the streets began discussing the issue. To them, Luther became a hero, not necessarily because of his theology, but because they wanted to keep German money in Germany and not send it to Rome. ☺

Luther wanted to fix a problem, not create an entirely new branch of Christianity. There were some issues that needed to be addressed. We wanted to fix them and move on.

The Reformation laid important foundations for the faith you and I share today:

- It insisted that people are not saved by works but by faith alone.
- It said that religious authority did not lie in the church but in scripture.
- It showed that all believers are priests before God as they present the sacrifice of their lives.
- It showed the importance of people having the written word of God in their own language.
- It showed that Christian living was the service of God in any useful calling, whether ordained or lay — one form of work is no more sacred and no more holy than another.

Over 1500 years before, there was controversy. For the lawyers in this morning's gospel lesson, there was controversial issue at stake. Their whole way of life, their world view was under assault from a man who claimed to be God, and who did God-like things. It was becoming too complex to let it go on much longer. Jesus had to be stopped. One way to stop him would be to discredit him.

What better way to discredit him than to ask him a question on a complex issue that any answer he gave would spell defeat? THEY wanted a debate.

The Pharisees felt they already had the answers to their questions. They felt they already knew the truth. They were not trying to learn anything from Jesus. What they could not anticipate though, was his question to them after he answered theirs. They asked, 'Which commandment in the law is the greatest?

God gave the Israelites something simple to follow, the Ten Commandments-- just ten simple rules to follow. There was nothing complex about it. But were the Israelites content with just ten commandments? Oh, no. They ended up making 613 separate commandments, 365 "thou shalt nots" (one for every day of the year) and 248 "thou shalts."

The rabbis of Jesus' time had meticulously gone through the first five books of the Bible. They took these hundreds of commands and attempted to identify which were great commands and which were little commands. Now you can well imagine that there was no end of debate on which belonged where. What these lawyers who are questioning Jesus are trying to do is to attempt to draw him into the debate.

It's not surprising that during Jesus' time the lawyers were looking for a way to summarize the teachings of Moses and the Prophets. Consider what this entails. There are 39 books in the Old Testament. These books, Genesis to Malachi, were written over a 1500 year period. They describe events, which occurred over 4000 years of history. There are at least 30 different authors. The books contain many forms of literature: history, poetry, songs, prophecy, wisdom, and story form. And the list of characters and events is staggering. How in the world do you summarize such a collection?

The first commandment Jesus chooses derives from Deuteronomy 6:5 and the second from Leviticus 19:18. The new dimension to Jesus' interpretation comes from the close connection of the first and second tables of the law. The love of neighbor is not added to the first commandment, but flows from it.

Interestingly enough, Jesus was not the first person to bring these two commandments together as a summary. If you look at this teaching in Luke you will see that it is the Lawyer who summarizes the Law in this way and not Jesus. So this is not unique to Jesus. What is significant here is Jesus' small but powerful statement at the end. He says, "All the Law (that's the first five books of the Old Testament) and the Prophets (that's most of the rest of the Old Testament) hang on these two commandments." The greatest commandment is to love.

Frederick Buechner, in The Magnificent Defeat writes, "The love for equals... is a

human thing--of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing--the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, and the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing--to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich. The world is always bewildered by its saints.

And then there is the love for the enemy--love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain.... This is God's love. It conquers the world.

At age 17 Jennie Todd found fault with everything about the church from the teaching methods to the time worship was held. She resented her parents forcing her to go to church and Sunday School every week. She would sit in her class with her arms folded across her chest, slumped in a folding chair in the back of the class. She refused to make friends or to participate in class discussions. It was clear to everyone Jennie did not want to be there.

One night, though, Jennie came home to find her parents huddled in the driveway in their bathrobes. Their house was engulfed in flames. They watched all their worldly possessions consumed in blazes as the fire department desperately worked in vain. It was a tragedy she would never forget.

Then shortly after the fire, something happened that took Jennie by surprise. Some of the girls from her Sunday School class came to visit her. One of the girls handed her an envelope. Jennie opened the envelope with trembling hands to discover it was filled with money. "It's from everyone in the class," one of the girls told her. "We took a collection."

Jennie was overwhelmed by the love and affection she was shown that day. She never really wanted to be part of the class, but the class showed her how much they cared for her. "I received a lot more than money that day," she reflected, "I received unconditional love and a fresh realization of what it means to belong to the church."

Our society bombards us almost daily with the message that we should care only about ourselves. "You owe it to yourself," we hear in advertisements for vacation trips. "You deserve the best." "You deserve a break today." (well maybe not the best. Sorry Joyce Pennington but Jack in the Box now has a Rib Eye burger.) So I'm told. ☺

Jesus' teachings run exactly counter to this prevalent attitude. The mark of a Christian is the love we show for one another. 1

When I wore my Astros Polo Shirt to Lunas on Friday night for Wilton Pate and Rapahel Melendez birthday party, one of Raphael's nephews pointed to the Astros Logo on my shirt and asked, "How long have you been on the bandwagon?" He went on to complain about all of the people wearing orange and blue shirts all over town. I assured him I am a native Astros fan and attend at least once a year whether I need to or not. He however was a New England Patriots fan. His commitment was on full display with his Patriots cap, and shirt and Patriot tattoos on BOTH forearms. Now that's commitment!

Scholar Douglas Hare points out that "love" in the biblical tradition is marked by concretely expressed commitment. To love is to have an unwavering commitment to another, a commitment that expresses itself tangibly. "Love," as Jesus uses it here, is a call to commit one's self fully and concretely to both God and neighbor.

In an age when the word 'love' is greatly abused, it is important to remember that the primary component of biblical love is not affection but COMMITMENT. Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we consider all that God has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that God demands of us but rather stubborn, unwavering commitment. Similarly, to love our neighbor, including our enemies, does not mean that we must feel affection for them. To love the neighbor is to imitate God by taking their needs seriously. 2

This week as the Reformation has been on some people's minds I've heard some comeback with "Well we had our own Reformation with Vatican II." Luther's Reformation eventually brought about change to the church he wanted to change. It only took 448 years. On December 8, 1965 Vatican II closed. Several changes resulted from the council, including the renewal of consecrated life with a revised charism, ecumenical efforts towards dialogue with other religions, and the universal call to holiness.

Last Sunday you heard from 5 of our new members and 1 of our long time members about how they were affected by your living out the Great Commission- to make disciples of all nationalities, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded us.

This Sunday you have heard about the one command that summarizes all of the commands, to love the Lord with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. This Sunday you have witnessed the celebration of those who have demonstrated their commitment to this church for 40, 50, 60 and 70 years. That's commitment!

Next Sunday we will ask you to declare your love for God and for others by pledging your commitment to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. They were not suggestions. We will ask you to come forward for Communion like we usually do, but on the way we ask you to bring your pledge card that reflects your commitment to carry out his Great Commission and your commitment to obeying what Jesus called the "Greatest Commandment".

Let's pray. Almighty God and Father of all persons: You have stated clearly your commandment to love you with our whole being, and to love all persons as ourselves. Grant us hearts capable of expressing that kind of love; that our worship may be sincere, and our society a true family of brothers and sisters.

You are our source of steadfast love. In you we may rejoice and be glad all our days. With your favor upon us the works of our hands prosper to your honor and glory. When with fear and trembling your followers have faced an unknown future, you have sent forth your Spirit to comfort them in their plight and encourage them with your strength.

We thank you O God that your presence abides with us. We rejoice in the truth that Christ died to make known. We pray with the assurance that you know of our needs before we utter the words.

We pray for patience when we experience conflict. Help us to take the time necessary to discern you will. When we are hemmed in on every side and we must decide, give us boldness to act, and a clear sense of your guidance as we begin to act.

Control our tempers, O God, when we feel put down. As once and for all Christ died to redeem us, may we save others from suffering disgrace. Keep us humble in the face of our enemies, armed with the conviction that your love abides. Help us to honor their need for well-being, and work toward forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.

We pray for courage in declaring the gospel. Help us not to hide the faith we confess. May others see sincerity in how we seek solutions, and honesty in our confrontation with forces that oppose your will. As you call us in Christ's name to specific tasks of ministry give us strength to respond with insight and hope. Send the Spirit to guide us as we go forth to serve.

This morning we give thanks for all those who have blazed trails before us, from Peter and Paul to our brother Martin Luther to our brother Martin Luther King Jr.. We celebrate those who have been faithful saints in this congregation, following Jesus for 40, 50, 60 and even 70 years. We are grateful for their service and for their faithful witness in our community.

Hear the prayer concerns of those gathered here this day.

1 (Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes, from Matthew, Interpretation Commentaries, p. 260)

2 ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by King Duncan