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Matthew 22:34-46
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Living a Divided Life

If you know me and DeLynn at all, then you know that we LOVE Jeopardy!

It's a gameshow on TV that is easy to play from the comfort of your own couch, and you can even feel slightly brilliant every time you get one right. At least we do!

Jeopardy's format puts questions in the form of answers, and the answers must take the form of questions.

Since we have a DVR we can also pause the program anytime we want to give us more time to come up with the appropriate question.

True confession, even then, we don't do all that well.

It's obviously a winning formula for a game show, because Alex Trebek just started his thirty-third season as the game's host.

That whole question-and-answer thing was something Jesus was pretty good at, too.

And in our text for this morning, Jesus gets into a quasi-debate with the Pharisees.

And, I got to tell ya, there is no debate like a religious debate.

You see, religious disputes are extremely difficult to handle because everyone engaged in a religious dispute claims to have the Word of God and the will of God on his or her side.

When a person believes that he or she knows the Word, has the Word, reads the Word, and speaks the Word, there's not really much room left for open dialogue and critical reflection on what we believe and why we believe it.

And I have to admit, on some issues, I am as guilty as the next guy.

It's no wonder then, that throughout history, almost every religious reformer who has attempted to challenge, reinterpret, or broaden the traditional long-standing religious views of the faithful, has met with strong and sometimes even violent opposition.

Opposition that was mounted and advanced by religious people who sincerely believed that they were defending the Word and the will of God from being altered, contaminated, or changed by something or someone considered to be new, different, or strange.

In the last few years, just such a dispute has caused a number of churches to leave our denomination.

In the 22nd chapter of Matthew there is that kind of tension. There is pressure.

You see, the Pharisees were the "Defenders of the Faith" of their day. And while the Pharisees generally get a bad press, we need to understand that they were the good guys of their day.

They cared about the spiritual health and status of God's people but they were prejudiced by a theological orthodoxy that could not entertain an alternative perspective.

And so, in the beginning of the chapter, prior to our text for this morning, these religious authorities have repeatedly tried to trap Jesus with their trick questions.

But every time, he evades their trap. He refuses to be caught by their either-or options, their rigid theological categories.

And at every turn, Jesus' answers unsettle the ordered and controlled world of the Pharisees.

Jesus disrupts their interpretations of Scripture, and even for some, rearranges their theological certainties.

Now, the Pharisees are back for one last attempt to trick Jesus into saying something that will justify arresting him.

Naturally, it's a lawyer who comes up with the ultimate question.

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" It was an appropriate question to ask to a teacher like Jesus.

You see, this was one of the discussions going on among the Pharisees and others who studied the Scriptures. "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Now, just to clarify, when they asked about the Law, what they meant were the five Books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible (Genesis through Deuteronomy).

The Books of Moses contain 613 different commandments which all faithful Jews were to observe.

In theory, all 613 commandments were considered to be of equal importance.

Some rabbis divided the 613 into the 365 “thou shalt nots”, one for each day of the year, and the 248 “thou shalt”, one for each bone of the body.

As one rabbi put it, the law thus applied “to all our times and all our movements.”

And, as I said, there was an ongoing debate among rabbis about which of the commandments are more important, and which less.

Different schools had different opinions.

Regardless of Jesus’ answer, the Pharisees would be able to argue against him saying that actually there are different commandments of equal importance.

But what does Jesus do in his divine wisdom?

He lifts their conversation to a whole different level. Jesus’ answer is:

“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.”

Okay, that was actually a pretty safe answer. It comes from a verse in Deuteronomy, chapter six, that is known as the *Shema*, a part of a daily prayer recited by all faithful Jews.

Then, Jesus adds something to it, another commandment, this time from Leviticus, chapter 19. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Okay, this might have been a little unexpected, but was still well within everyone's understanding of what God wants from us.

Loving our neighbors as ourselves is certainly a good commandment to follow the first.

Then Jesus says: "In these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

And this too makes perfect sense when you think about it: because the first four of the Ten Commandments are all about loving God, and the last six show how we are to love our neighbors.

I would have loved to have been there to see the Pharisees' reaction; because whether they were willing to admit it or not, Jesus had not only avoided the trap they'd set for him, but he'd also answered their question correctly.

And I have to believe that deep down, they knew he was right!

The Pharisees, remember, were all about the law; specifically, following the law to the letter.

And to be fair to them, following the law to the letter was for them an act of great and pious faith!

But here's Jesus now, to remind them that at the heart of all that law, is to be the one simple truth of LOVE. Loving God... and loving people.

In the words of Hillel, an ancient teacher of the Jewish faith, “and the rest is commentary.”

Love is the key. Love is the fulfillment of all the Law.

Love is to involve all the powers of our body and soul and involve all of our senses outwardly and inwardly.

It involves all of our intellect and all of our reason, with all of our thoughts, words, and works.

It involves all of these dimensions focused on God and our neighbor. Love demands that we cherish God and that we serve our neighbor.

Marcus Borg, the renowned Biblical Scholar and theologian, has written that so often “we have made being Christian very complex, as if it’s about getting our doctrines right.

“But being Christian,” Borg says, “is actually very simple, even breathtakingly simple.”

And basically, it comes down to this: being Christian is about loving God and loving what God loves; and what God loves is us ... and them.

Being Christian is about our working with God to become that kind of person, understanding that, more often than not, love involves steely-eyed determination, great discretion and a relentless fervor to do what’s right, no matter the cost.

Love is meant to be shared actively; doing what we can do to be about the business of God’s love in the world:

Bringing light into darkness, lifting up the fallen and bringing them hope, doing justice in the places and amongst the people where “the power of politics, and the politics of power” seem to reign supreme.

It’s about living unto the love we have for God by letting it be transformed into the love we show for others.

So, that means (at least to me) wanting to throw people out of our country, or prevent them from coming into our country...

... or wanting to not provide for them because they aren’t White “Christians” ...

... or because their sacred burial grounds don’t look like our cemeteries ...

... or because we think they aren’t trying to find a job so therefore they don’t deserve any help ...

Those things directly fly in the face of loving God and loving neighbor.

True love has everything to do with our faith and how we live our lives.

And, our faith and our lives cannot be lived out separately.

One cannot believe in God and not have that have an effect on the way one lives their life.

And one cannot live their life without it saying what they believe about God.

Faith and life cannot occupy different parts of your life. Instead, they influence one another. They say something about each other.

Peter Rollins, an Irish theologian, tells a story about a minister. It is Sunday evening and she is sitting in her house, reading a book.

One of her parishioners knocks on the door. She opens the door. He is a big guy. He is sweating.

It is obvious that he ran all the way to the house. He is in tears.

He says, "Listen there is a family that lives just down the road. The guy lost his job in the recession, she is looking after three kids, their mother stays with them.

"But they don't have enough money for their rent. They've got no money at the moment. And their gonna get kicked out of the house.

"Even if they are one day late on their rent, they are just going to get kicked out on the street.

"It's the middle of winter. We've got to do something. Please!"

So, the minister says, "Yes, we will go and we will get some help for them."

Then, just in passing she says, "Oh and how do you know them?"

And he says, "Oh, well, I'm their landlord."

The religious leaders ask a question about how one lives their life and Jesus brings God into the answer.

The religious leaders ask a question about how to be in relationship with God and Jesus brings how one lives their life into the answer.

Faith and life – they have to be held together, not separate. And yet, for this landlord, faith and life were divorced.

In this landlord's faith life, he is concerned for this poor family that doesn't have enough money to pay the rent and he is desperate to do something.

But in his professional and social life, it is just business as usual. If you can't pay the rent, out you go. Those are the rules.

And so, this man is living a divided life. He worships God and does nice things on the weekends, but come Monday, he steps back into the rat race.

The very thing this man is doing on Monday is the same thing he is concerned about and fighting on Sunday morning.

His faith and his life are divided. They don't intersect.

He can't see how the way he is living out his faith on Sunday is directly connected to the way he is living out his life on Monday.

But, God cannot simply be located in one part of a person's life. God is a part of the whole darn thing.

And so, when we gather together on Sunday morning to worship God, we can't afford to do so in a way that separates and protects us from the world out there.

Instead, we gather together to rehearse. To rehearse worshipping God, so that when these doors open and we step out onto the stage of life, we know our parts, we know our lines.

We know how to worship God ... out there.

And to love and worship God on Sunday is to love your neighbor on Monday morning. And to love your neighbor on Monday morning is to love God on Monday morning.

Later in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples:

“When you fed those who were hungry, you fed me. When you clothed the naked, you clothed me. When you welcomed the stranger, you welcomed me.”

If we are honest, we need to acknowledge that this landlord is not so different from you or me.

His livelihood, the food he puts on his family's table, depends on people paying their rent on time. And so, he is stuck.

We all are. Stuck in self-interest. Self-preservation.

How do I live out my faith and care for my neighbor when my life is on the line too?

Perhaps, the place to start is to see that when you leave here this morning, God goes with you, calling “shotgun!” for the ride home and jumps in the front seat.

And then when you come back next week (you are coming back next Sunday, right?), not only do you return with God, but you also come with the successes and failures you've experienced during this week and come in search of both celebration and forgiveness.

So maybe-, the place to start is to acknowledge that life and faith cannot be lived out separately.

So, tell me, what are you and God doing tomorrow ... around 9 am?

Amen!