

October 23 –

“What commandment is the greatest?”

As a pastor, sometimes people come to me asking me some big theological question.

“Will my dog go to heaven?” Or, “What’s the difference between believing in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul?”

I like to discuss such questions. So if I lived in Jesus’ day I might have been a Pharisee. They seemed to enjoy the give-and-take of a lively debate. In much of Rabbinic thought, the disputation is valued more highly than clear, logical conclusions. Here is a story that illustrates the Jewish love of ambiguity:

Two men go to their rabbi with a dispute. One says to the rabbi, “This man bought from me a chicken. He should pay me for that chicken, isn’t that right, Rabbi?”

The rabbi answers, “Yes, of course, you are right.”

The second man says, “Yes Rabbi, I bought the chicken from him. But I did pay him and should not have to pay him again. Isn’t that right, Rabbi?”

The rabbi answers him, “Yes, of course you are right.”

The rabbi’s wife overhears the exchange and says to her husband, “Don’t be ridiculous. Certainly both men cannot be right.”

The rabbi turns to his wife and replies, “Ah, yes, you are right too!”

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Is that what today’s Gospel is about – a polite exchange about various ideas of God’s way?

They ask Jesus: “What commandment is the greatest?”

Great big religious question. The first five books of the Bible contain 613 commands – rules the Pharisees tried to follow.

Jesus refuses to be drawn into debate.

He simply repeats the Shema, a prayer said every day by everyone standing there, *Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.* Then he adds a second part, words also known by heart by everyone there – *love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.*

If they were hoping for a protracted debate, they were disappointed.

In fairness to the Pharisees, they didn’t ask, “What is the most important belief?” They asked, “What is the most important command?”

These are Jews after all. They knew that religion is more than just a matter of a set of ideas and concepts. Religion is the way that we love God by living lives that God loves, by doing that which God loves. And that’s what Jesus stresses in his response – love God; love neighbor.

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Therefore, what Jesus asked of his disciples was “Follow me!”

Jesus did not say, “Believe the following six things about me,” or “Follow these ten truths.” In the Gospels, Jesus calls people to a journey with him, not a seminar about him. Even when Jesus rarely mentions belief, he isn’t talking about a head-trip, a set of cool intellectual propositions. He is talking about an engaging, costly relationship. “Believe in me,” he says. Not “Believe these assertions about me,” but rather give in, be engaged, walk with me.

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Evelyn Underhill, one of the outstanding writers on mysticism, offers a parable of the spiritual journey. She writes that the spiritual journey is like the migration of humming birds, who twice each year take off into the unknown, committing themselves to the air and flying over the Gulf of Mexico, where there are no landmarks to give them any guidance. And yet without any hesitation, every fall thousands of them take off, and in the spring thousands return undergoing the same hazards. This migration, she claims, is a good example of what the spiritual journey is all about. We have no idea of where we are going. There are all kinds of difficulties we cannot foresee. The birds commit themselves to the elements by way of blind trust in their instinct.

The spiritual journey is basically a surrender in blind trust to Jesus - a conviction that what we hope to find on the journey we will certainly find. But there is no guarantee that we will arrive safely. We must let go and let the wind, the Holy Spirit, take us where we hope to go ... There is no turning back once we have started because the sky is a big place, and we had better stay with the flock, the other followers of Jesus.... The call that God has given us, is a promise that is just as reliable as the instinct of the birds. Instead of surrendering to a migratory instinct, we surrender to Christ's transforming process.

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What does God want from us?

Answer: To love God with everything that we've got and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Of course, this doesn't answer every possible question like, "Okay, fine, but who is this God?" or

"Well, who is my neighbor?" his is the whole point of why we are at church, this Sunday or any other – to gain the skills and the insights, the courage and the conviction to obey Jesus' twofold command.

We do not, on our own, know what love is or who our neighbors are. These words await definition. Therefore, we must get up, get dressed, and come down to church together to learn just what these seemingly obvious words mean when used by Jesus, Son of God. Love in the name of Jesus comes from being taught and empowered by Jesus.

Jesus demonstrated, enacted, and embodied a very different definition of love -- like commanding us to turn the other cheek when struck on one cheek, to go the second mile when commanded by an enemy to go one mile, to forgive our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, and to give without expectation of return.

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An old wise teacher at a theological school often greeted the seminarians, at the beginning of class, with the question, "*Good morning, gentlemen, how are the prostitutes?*"

He was not making a negative judgment on the morals of the seminarians. Rather, he was reminding them, that, as Christians, their concern was to be for the poor, the downtrodden, the needy, the sinful, and yes, the prostitutes. That was the supreme test for how they were doing as future Christian leaders.

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Jesus promises to meet us, after all, in one particular place: in our needy neighbors. At the last judgment, when the Son of Man comes in his glory, all people will be divided into sheep and goats. The good sheep will be invited into the kingdom of God for one

reason, and one reason only, predicts Jesus: They were the ones who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick.

And, most amazing of all, when the good sheep served their neighbors, they were really - surprise, surprise - serving Jesus himself. When they fed a homeless woman, they were feeding Jesus. When they gave a cup of water to an immigrant groundskeeper, they were refreshing Jesus. When they welcomed a stranger to worship, they were welcoming Jesus.

To love one's neighbor is to love Jesus Christ.

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Those of you who have sat through lots of sermons, and read lots of scripture, could tell us all that Jesus' way is demanding, a way that sometimes lands us into the middle of all sorts of complexities.

And yet, in that demanding way, we believe there is life abundant. Just a few chapters after this exchange, Jesus will define what he means by "love," by really loving God with everything we've got, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. He will give definition to all this, not standing before the temple and having a theological argument, but by stretching out his arms on the cross.

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Maybe our problem is this: we get our lives organized over time; we have our commitments, our busy-ness, our work, socializing, tackling the mortgage, hauling the children around. We may even be doing some good. But we are pretty much booked – and then we come to God and say “I have a little time and a few dollars left over. I’m a Christian, so here, God: I’ll give you what I’ve got left.” Then we feel fairly noble: “I gave what I had left to God.”

But committed Christians say “God, it’s all yours. It’s all up for grabs. No prior commitment is sacred. Whatever you want me to do with all of my time, whatever you want me to do with all of my energy, whatever you want me to do with all of my possessions, my money, whatever it is that I have: God, it’s all yours. I hold nothing back for myself.”

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When asked what God requires, Jesus responded rather simply: we are to love God with everything we’ve got and our neighbor as ourselves.

These are His words, and his is the way to life. Will you dare to walk that way and talk that way, loving God in all that you do and say, not as we define it, but as Jesus shows it to be?