

Pentecost 21A, Proper 25. October 25, 2020. Matthew 22:34-46.

Today's reading is the formal end of the long Jerusalem debate between Jesus and the local religious leaders. He has raided the Temple, healed the sick, and taught openly in the courtyard, drawing challenges to his authority from priests, scholars, and teachers with more official standing. They have challenged him and tried to trap him; he has responded with acerbic parables and artful dodges. The stakes have been incredibly high and the exchanges have been tense. We know how high the stakes are, because while they stop questioning him here, their plotting intensifies after this. This is the formal end of the debate, but there are still two more endings: Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

As the end of a debate with life and death on the line, this passage is a little anti-climactic. Jesus answers a pretty straightforward question with a pretty straightforward answer, and then he poses a messianic riddle and everyone is scared off. This final test the Pharisees set for Jesus is a pretty common question. There are a lot of commandments, and any influential teacher is eventually going to need to have some means of prioritizing them. Jesus answers the question well, but his answer isn't revolutionary. This story in other gospels even has the lawyer reply, "Yeah, that's right." If Jesus were proposing something no one had heard before, we would expect more of an outcry, but in fact this was a pretty common pairing for the most important commandments. This is the so-called two tablets of the ten commandments: our duties to God and our duties to each other, all summed up with love.

And then Jesus goes on what I think is the attack, with this question about David and the messiah. It seems to work, because no one dares to ask him another question, but it reads to me like one of those old Car Talk puzzlers, or a riddle that just needs you to be clever enough. "How can David's son be David's lord?" It's a Christological riddle, which seems disconnected from what has just been said and is a strange conclusion to a high stakes verbal sparring match.

I think that with this silly little riddle, Jesus might be gently making fun of the Pharisees. "You spend so much time wondering who the messiah will be, you trust so deeply in word games with the scriptures, you try to crack the code of when messiah will come, and I am standing right here. You've got your noses deep in scrolls, looking for the one who is talking to you." It may be that Jesus isn't trying to send anyone into a search through the scriptures to solve a problem, but is instead calling them to look at him.

If that's right, then there is a kind of logic here. What is the greatest commandment? To love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. But what that means, or what that might look like, isn't immediately clear to all of us. And so the second is like unto it: love your neighbor as yourself. The two are alike, not exactly the same, but if we aren't sure how to love God, we can start by loving those in front of us. We cannot love God if we do not love the people in front of us.

And if we aren't sure how to love the people in front of us, then we look to the example of Jesus, the messiah. It just might be that this little riddle about lords and sons is there not to stump anyone, but to further clarify what love means by pointing us to Jesus. What does it mean

to love our neighbor? It means to let our plans be disrupted by their needs, to work for their healing, to eat with them and to share food with them, to listen to them and to forgive them. To speak truth to them and for them. Finally, of course, it means to be willing to die for them and, what is sometimes harder, to keep giving our lives away for them.

It seems like an odd end to such a long and important encounter. But in the times of greatest intensity, with the highest stakes, it makes all the sense in the world to hold tightly to the basics that are most important to us. At the end of an encounter that has been hostile and dangerous, that has focused in on questions of authority and faithfulness, loyalty and social order, Jesus returns to love of God and neighbor. With the help of this lawyer, he takes us back to the absolute heart of our commitments.

Acrimonious debates with high stakes, full of hostility and danger, can strangely sometimes make us forget what matters most to us. There is a momentum to them that carries us along, like a sort of rip tide, and at times the tide carries us further away from our deepest commitments. As we engage now in struggles that matter, with real opponents, this gospel reminds us to struggle for and from what matters most. To hold close the heart of the matter. To make our most important choices on the basis of what we would live and die for. And of course, to choose and act not because of what we fear, but because of what we love. Amen.