

## Proper 25A. Matthew 22:34-46

Let no Christian confuse “simple” with “easy.” In today’s Gospel passage, Jesus gives us a simple formula for the proper human response to God: love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and love our neighbors as ourselves. It is a beautifully simple distillation of the entire Bible into two clauses. All of that giant book we have sitting on the lectern boils down to these two commands. It is elegant, it is simple, but it is not easy: all we have to do is love someone we have never seen, and what may be even harder, love those people we see everyday. The “what,” then, is perfectly simple and is really pretty short. The question is “how.”

We will, by all means, turn to the how in a moment, but this passage is a kind of turning point in the Gospel, so we would do well to pause and mark what has been going on in the Gospel of Matthew, and to note what is coming. It’s hard to tell, because our liturgical calendar does not perfectly align with the lectionary’s trip through the Gospel of Matthew, but this passage actually occurs during Holy Week. Jesus was from the boonies up north, in a region called Galilee, and now he has come down to the capitol, Jerusalem.

And within the context of the book of Matthew, he is now in the final week before his crucifixion. We won’t read that part yet—Advent comes before we get there. But he gets to Jerusalem and undergoes these conflicts with the religious authorities. We’ve been reading them for weeks: the religious leaders, usually the Pharisees, challenge him, and he responds in some way and then threatens a bunch of people with hell or the outer darkness or whatever, as one does.

{I imagine it as basically “Prime Minister’s Questions,” the hilarious British parliamentary procedure that is broadcast here on C-Span—where British members of parliament get to ask the Prime Minister questions, and he has to respond, and all the rest of the parliament boos or cheers or laughs or just generally makes as much noise as possible. That’s kind of what these last few weeks have felt like to me.} {But} [And] this is the final conflict before Jesus is arrested. If you notice, our passage ends “nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.” Between this exchange and his arrest, there’s a kind of breather where he is talking to his followers, the men and women who were his disciples and friends.

So this is the end of an important series of conflictual encounters with the religious leaders of his day. He wins all of these encounters, but they also seal his fate—it is clear to everyone after these stories that we’ve been reading for the last few weeks that there can be no compromise between Jesus and the people in power at that time.

So this is the final exam, the last test of Jesus’ orthodoxy. And the question the Pharisees ask isn’t an uncommon one. Nor is Jesus’ answer radical or unusual. You see, there are a lot of laws and commands in the Bible—traditionally, the Torah is supposed to contain 613 laws. And the fact is we just can’t apply every law or command or to every situation. So we have to have a way to sort them. When we get into that situation that we all know, where all the options seem to have serious drawbacks, we need a root principle that we can know is always right and always applies.

Jesus was not the first person to give this answer to this question. It was the standard response. There is a story of a rabbi who died when Jesus was still a kid. And he was asked to recite all of the Law while standing on one leg, which for some reason was a test of his holiness (oh, the things ministers are asked to do!). So Rabbi Hillel stood on one leg and said essentially this—love God and treat others as you would like to be treated. So Jesus passes the test—yes,

this guy is a faithful Jewish man who knows and understands the Law and the Prophets. They have failed to trap him.

But then, if you're a Pharisee, the terrifying thing happens. After they have grilled him for a few chapters, he turns to them: What do *you* think . . . It is the same thing that happened to Job: after Job has questioned God at great length and with great sophistication, God turns around and questions Job. It reminds me of something one of my favorite authors, Annie Dillard said: "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return." I think this happens all the time. If we are paying attention, the questions we ask God are often answered by God questioning us—what do *you* think about the Messiah?

Jesus turns to the Pharisees and asks them a question. This exchange may not mean very much to us at first. Jesus, who we believe to be the Messiah, asks the religious leaders what they think about the Messiah. And their answer—the Son of David—is correct, even in Christian terms, but Jesus says that it's incomplete. Jesus then quotes a Psalm that is attributed to David, in which David calls the Messiah, who is descended from him, his Lord. So how can the Messiah be both David's descendant or son and David's Lord? Got all that?

I think that Jesus is making fun of them. Because they have for quite a while now been standing right in front of him, challenging him, questioning him, trying to trap him. They have, in short, been submitting him to a PhD oral exam. And Jesus finally twists them up in this scriptural knot to say "Hey, all this fancy book-learning and memorization of the Law isn't getting you anywhere if you can stand right in front of me for hours, and not realize that you're having an encounter with God." Now listen, I value PhD oral exams. In my free time, I am getting a PhD myself. But finally, the beauty of religious study and knowledge, and the fun of religious puzzlers, is empty if we can stand right in front of God and not even know it.

And now we're getting back to the how; how we love God with all we've got, and also love our neighbor as ourselves. The two are finally indistinguishable. Each person is made in the image of God, and so we are always standing right in front of God. If we can do one of the great commandments with some right-headedness and oomph, then we've already gone a long way to doing them both. And if one of them seems to be getting in the way of the other, then we know that we're doing something wrong.

I'll close with three tips that help me to love God and my neighbor, and I'd like to hear your tips, too. First, love is much more a choice than it is an emotion. I can't feel all misty-eyed about everyone, but I can try to do them good. Second, I'm not saintly enough to love on my own—I draw on this community and other communities to help teach me how to love better. I try to soak up excess love here and take it with me to darker places. And third, the reason it makes so much sense for Jesus to start talking about the Messiah right after he has talked about the impossible command to love: when we aren't sure what love would look like in a given situation, Jesus is our model for how to love. The final meaning of what it is to be the Messiah is to love; and the final meaning of Christian love is found in the life of Jesus.