

Mt 22:34-46 – “Silencing the Pharisees”

I ran across an honest-to-goodness Pharisee yesterday ... at least I sure think he comes across in the way the Pharisees seem to in the New Testament. I didn't meet him in person, but instead on TV. Every now and again I actually watch Lou Dobbs on CNN to get a dose of bad economic analysis and overinflated opinions, just to check out my pacemaker. Yesterday Lou was interviewing the Governor of Missouri, a dapper young man and one of Lou's favourites, as he is leading a vigorous crackdown on illegal immigrants.

Now I can't say I'm totally in favour of illegal immigration, but I can understand that it is not nearly as simple an issue as some seem to think it is, and that there ought to be some room for grace. Take as but one example the case of a family in which the parents have no legal basis for living in the country, but who have several young children who were born in the United States, making them legitimate citizens. What are the ethical issues around deporting the entire family, citizen children and all?

I don't think I'd have paid too much attention to the yakkety-yak between Lou and this young Governor, except for the part when I gagged over them glibly stroking each other with the reassurance that “they were part of the most welcoming country in the world!” The self-righteousness of that stroking seemed to me to be like Pharisees to the n'th degree ... it was all about rules, and well, the people could just obey or else!

We meet some real Pharisees in our gospel reading this morning. They circle like vultures to ask Jesus a question, which on the surface could be considered a legitimate question if one assumes they were actually looking for a considered answer. Matthew takes pains, however, that we recognize this was no casual question, or even a legitimate question seeking a thoughtful reply. The gospel author gives us two major clues that the Pharisees were probing to find a chink in Jesus' armor, to see if they could trip him up. The first clue is that the Pharisees were moved to come to question Jesus because he was moving up the threat scale, because he had just silenced the Sadducees. On the one hand, the Pharisees might have been silently cheering the fact that Jesus had shut down the Sadducees over the issue of resurrection, but since he had already also shut down some Herodians and disciples of the Pharisees over the issue of taxes, the Pharisees were now in no mood to let Jesus get away with any more victories. Matthew tells us that they set out to test him – the second clue that this was no friendly, academic Q & A session.

Naturally enough, because the Pharisees were so rule-based, they set out to trap Jesus with a trick question about the commandments, the law understood to have been given by God through Moses. “Teacher (can't you just hear the smarminess in their voices?), which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Do we ever hear echoes of that question even today, don't we?! Oh, the details have changed, but the mean spirit is the same as in those Pharisees. “How can you call yourself a real Christian?” is often the underlying question in contemporary trap-like questions, usually based on a misreading or misunderstanding of scripture. The details may have changed, but the same rigid, letter-of-the-law overruling the spirit of the law is still very much in evidence.

Jesus shut down the Pharisees – silenced them – with a two-part counter-attack, but he accomplished that shutdown with a response full of grace and love. It's true that Jesus will soon turn to his disciples and the crowd and spell out in wondrous detail the charges he has against the Pharisees – recall the “woe to you scribes and Pharisees,

hypocrites!” passages in the next chapter. But here, in responding to the direct challenge from the Pharisees, Jesus replies with both grace and skill, besting them at their own game and doing it in style.

The first part of his response is a direct reply to their question about which commandment is the greatest, and Jesus replies to a question about scripture with scripture. He quotes from the ‘shema’, a foundational tenet of Jewish faith and worship – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Technically this is not part of the Mosaic law, but nevertheless a foundational commandment of their faith documented in Deuteronomy 6:5. To that command, Jesus joins the injunction from Leviticus 19:18, the command to love one’s neighbour.

Now, we Christians would love to claim that Jesus invented this particular answer, was the first to join the two injunctions together, but that is just not so, as the two commandments had been joined by rabbis long before Jesus. The origin may not be clear, but Jesus’ answer was: love God with all that you are, and live out that love in relationship with your community – a community of friends, relatives, loved ones, neighbours, and even strangers.

What is important for us as Christians, of course, is the stamp of authority placed upon the joining of these two commandments by Jesus’ doing so also, and by his declaration that put together these two injunctions form the basis of all of scripture. “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” That’s what his declaration means, namely that the entire scripture, what we now call the Old Testament, derives from and is dependant upon these two commandments. The fact that this declaration was made by the one whose death and resurrection brought into being the New Testament gives his response the authority of God, and so we too are called to learn this saying and to write it upon our hearts – to live it out with all of who we are.

In a wonderful two-dimensional image these two commandments merge to completely define our response in faith. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” calls us to focus everything that is part of us toward heaven, toward the God who created us, the God who has patiently over thousands of years taken the initiative to enter into holy covenants with his people. This most important command gives us a simple entry point into the tangled complexity of life and faith. Difficult to implement properly, but we as people were never very good at following commands in any event – that’s why God had to and still has to come to our rescue. Difficult to implement, but oh-so-easy to understand. This is the simplest of rules: with all that you are. No conditional clauses, no wiggle room, no need for further rules to define what is meant by ‘all of you’. It means, “all of you”. Love the Lord your God with everything you’ve got, with all who you are. And then, love your neighbour just like that also.

And then we come to the second part of this concluding episode between Jesus and the authorities, and Matthew makes it very clear that it is a conclusion. Jesus fires a pair of questions back at his attackers that they were not able to answer. Drawing from scripture Jesus presents a dilemma to the Pharisees that they are not able to answer. On the one hand they affirm that the messiah is the son of David; on the other hand Jesus points out that even David, led by the Spirit, calls the messiah Lord. The Pharisees have no answer to this apparent contradiction in scripture and are silenced. Unable to resolve

the dilemma from their literalist reading of scripture, they fall silent, not daring to ask any more questions.

Some faithful Christians today use this concluding statement from Matthew as a justification for not asking – or even allowing – any questions, fearing perhaps that to ask serious questions of Jesus is somehow a kind of disrespect. What could be further from the truth? It is clear from scripture – even or especially from this very episode – that Jesus was more than willing, even eager, to enter into dialogue with anyone who was seeking the truth, who was yearning to learn more about God and God's will for us. And Jesus was abundantly clear from his 'ultimate commandment' that God's will is that we should love God with all that we are, and love each other with that same intensity and depth.

Sadly, there are still many people today who could be called Pharisees, living their faith to the letter of the law but without a hint of compassion or grace. It is all too easy to find faithful Christians who in their own fears use the fear of God like a whip to bring others into line; who use ribbons of proof texts from scripture to bind up others, rendering them powerless slaves; who use the Bible like a club to beat others into meek submission as diligent followers more of themselves than of Christ.

But Jesus has shown us that there is a grace-filled way to silence these Pharisees. Not through conflict, not through becoming ever more like them, but instead through hearing the Word and will of God in scripture, and by living out the loving response that forms the greatest commandment of all. This answer from Jesus offers to anyone who has ears to hear an immense freedom, and a deep and significant challenge – the freedom, and the challenge, to accept being loved by God as the starting point and foundation for being, for living. Loving your neighbour as yourself begins with loving yourself, which in turn begins with understanding how you are loved by Christ, with a love that stretched across the centuries to the cross, to the tomb, and to the tomb emptied by the resurrecting power of God in Jesus. Love God with all that you are, with a love fuelled not by fear but by the glorious understanding of the love with which God loves you, a love shown so clearly in the redeeming sacrifice of his own Son, Christ our Lord – and then love God by loving your neighbour as yourself.