

Mt 22:34-46 – “A Defense Against Declining Civility”

I find it difficult to drag my eyes away from the TV these days, drawn there by the fascination of the political gong show that just keeps unfolding with stuff you couldn't make up! Self-grandizing rallies; tweet storms; untruths and outright lies; name-calling and bullying – all these and more signal a decline in civility not only in politics but in national and international relations, a decline that after 50 years of incubating is now emerging as a full-blown problem.

As recently as the Friday night news on Global I saw two items that exemplified this problem. One described how the victims of the recent mass shooting in Las Vegas were being 'trolled' online, subject now to vitriolic claims that their injuries are faked. The other was an interview with a man here in Vancouver who runs classes on entrepreneurship who claims that innovation in Canada is lagging the rest of the world, in large part because we have moved to an educational environment in which unlike in the past there are no longer 'gold', 'silver', and 'bronze' awards for excellence, but instead everyone gets a gold star.

I claim 50 years of incubation of the decline in civility because I witnessed the beginnings of this trend in the mid 1960's, as educational systems across Canada and the United States adopted newly-popular approaches, at the heart of which were some themes that were intended to free childrens' minds for creativity; included in those themes were such tenets as "never tell a child 'no' as it will repress them"; "there are no experts" (and the related "your opinion is as valid as anyone else's"). Now that we are at the third generation exposed to this we can observe what I then predicted as outcomes: the blind acceptance of junk science, a revolt against thoughtful governance, and the decline of civilized discourse. All of these phenomena have of course been accelerated by the explosive growth of social media, and all of them can be observed everywhere, including in the church, a place one would expect or at least hope to find grace and compassion but which sadly often exhibits the opposite in Pharisaic behavior.

I see in our text from Matthew's gospel for today, with Pharisees weaving a web of entrapment against Jesus using rules as their gossamer, a pre-echo of our current society. These real Pharisees in our gospel reading this morning moved furtively like spiders on the web, asking Jesus a question which on the surface might be considered a legitimate question – but only 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 also specifically tells us that the Pharisees set out to test Jesus, clearly showing that this was no friendly, academic, rabbinic 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 to the people by God through Moses. "Teacher (can't you just hear the smarminess in their voices?), which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Now, that's a good question. The problem is not the question, the problem is the desire to use the question as a weapon, and the lack of intent to hear the real answer. It was a good question, and Jesus gave a divinely good answer.

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, providing a wonderful two-dimensional model for the foundation of our faith. “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 that 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 – not with an abstract, mind or feeling based love, but a gutsy love of doing justice, feeding the hungry, comforting the lonely, serving all people.

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, also drawing from scripture, presents a dilemma to the Pharisees in a pair of questions that his attackers were 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” which would be unthinkable if he were David’s son. 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 and the silence of the crowd 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, was eager even, to enter into dialogue with anyone who was seeking the truth, anyone 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. People who are so focused on winning that they fail to acknowledge the cost to those who have lost. People who concentrate solely on “Jesus and me”, forgetting the other dimension of Christ’s new commandment – the relationship with others. People who cannot hear the truth of Christ for the noise of self-congratulation in their own ears. Self-proclaimed messiahs believing they are saving the church from itself.

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 giving-of-self 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. This graceful behavior both provides a civilized approach to others as well as a model of behavior that can provide others with a positive alternative. 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.