

“What’s the One Thing We Should Know?”

Matthew 22: 34-40

Let me just say at the very beginning of this sermon, I know that this is a beloved passage of Scripture for many, me included. How could we not lift it up as one of our top 10 stories of faith? After all, Jesus talks about loving God with all our heart, soul and mind. Jesus talks about loving our neighbors as ourselves. In just these few short verses, all Jesus talks about is love. These very verses speak to our core values as disciples of Christ.

As we read this text, we can almost imagine Jesus sitting there, teaching, giving out words of wisdom, words which will help us grow in our faith. In our minds, we create this scene where Jesus is surrounded by his disciples. They gaze up at him, expectantly, hanging on to Jesus’ every word. And then, as if the word comes down from on high, Jesus offers them this new commandment and they immediately begin to live it out in their lives.

We paint such a pretty picture that I’m sorry to burst everyone’s bubble. I hate that I have been given the task of bringing us all crashing back to reality but if I must, I must. Because, you see, if we are only reading this text from Matthew in an idealized way, then we have already missed the point. We have ignored the warning signs, signs that are flashing red, signs that are telling us of the dangers up

ahead. If we are only reading this verse to make us feel better about ourselves than we have missed the warnings signs which Matthew included in the very first verse, warning signs that tell us being a disciple of Christ is easier said than done.

So I invited us to take another look at this text and the context which surrounds it so that we will have a better understanding of what Matthew wants us to know. The very first verse in this sections says, “When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

Let me say that again...They asked Jesus a question to test him. This is no love feast between Jesus and his disciples, where Jesus offers the disciples words of wisdom. This is a power struggle between Jesus and the religious authorities at this time. They don't like the fact that Jesus rode into Jerusalem, greeted by palm branches and Hosannas. They don't like the fact that Jesus offers a teaching which welcomes those people on the margins. The religious authorities perceive Jesus as a threat to the power structures at that time so they began looking for ways to trick him, to trap him, to arrest him so that they could silence him, so that they could keep the status quo intact.

This is the scene which surrounds our text today. There is tension. There is anger. There is open hostility and all of this shapes Matthew's telling of what is the greatest commandment. This is not simply a feel good text. This text is a challenge

to the religious authorities, and yes, whether we want to admit or not, this text is a challenge to us as modern day disciples about our understanding of what it means to live out our faith, to live it out as if the Kingdom of God is in our midst, fully realized here on Earth. This text calls us to let the compassion of the laws and the words of the prophets, words that speak of justice and mercy to become a part of our soul as the people of God for a hurt and broken world.

Or let me say it this way...We cannot deny that sometimes we as the Church are our own worst enemies. We only have to look at our Disciples history to know that. Our founders realized that the Church had divided and split so many times that the Body of Christ in no way resembled the unified gathering Jesus envisioned when he told the disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. That's why they chose the name Christian. That's why they chose the name Disciples of Christ. They went with a name that on same level, as followers of Jesus Christ, we could all agree on, that we could all claim as our core identity.

Our founders lifted up a call to work for unity and oneness as the Body of Christ with the irony being that out of this call for unity three branches of the Christian Church was formed...Independent Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, and the Church of Christ. This last split happening here at our church over the debate on whether music should be allowed in worship or not.

All this is to say that there are stories upon stories within the larger Church history, and yes, even our own community of faith's history which tell of how arguments over what are "right" beliefs lead to divides and disagreements, stories which tell of times when the importance of "right" practice lead the charge of the church's mission rather than our call to love God and neighbor. There are stories upon stories throughout church history of divisions, stories that range from various Church councils arguing over complex theological issues such as the divinity of Jesus, to a story of a church in the North Carolina mountains which split over the deeply theological issue of whether or not to have an ice machine in the kitchen, one side "proclaiming that the ice machine violated the natural order established by God, and that If God had wanted the church to have ice available for them all the time, then God would have raised the freezing temperature of water."

I digress a bit but you see, too many times we as people faith get so caught up in the details, in the letter of the law that we forget, we ignore, we fail to live out the compassion the law calls us to show and share. And we can't just pretend that this division and disagreement over practice and belief only happened in the past. We don't have to look any further than our own current culture to know that this is not true. Scripture is still being thrown at people, used as a weapon to wound and keep people out. It is still being used to belittle and dehumanize others. Nowadays it feels more like the Word of God is offered up by people of faith to

hurt rather than to heal. Just like it was when Matthew sat down to write these words to his community.

Matthew saw his community tearing each other part based on “right” belief, based on right practice. He wanted to remind them of what really matters when it comes to living out their call to be disciples of Christ for a hurting and broken world.

That’s why he has religious authorities come to Jesus to test him, He wants to show his community that there is more to Scripture than just reading words on a page. The Word of God calls them to be in relationship with one another. The Word of God calls them to be in relationship with others. The Word of God calls them to look beyond the details, to see the compassion and grace of the Kingdom of God, right there in their midst, compassion and grace which was first shown to them by a God who loved them more than they would ever know.

Matthew follows the pattern of past rabbis and teachers of combining these two great commandments into one. Matthew has Jesus reaffirm this practice, knowing that there is no way loving God could ever be separated from loving neighbor. Matthew has Jesus reaffirm what the Pharisees and the crowd already knew... that as people of faith, we are called to love God totally and express this love through the love of our neighbor.

Then Matthew has Jesus take it one step farther, shedding new light on this familiar call to faith. Matthew has Jesus reminding the religious leaders and us as modern day disciples that "what is owed to God and neighbor is not the carrying out of a specific law but a totally different approach to life based on relationship by saying all the laws and the words of the prophets hang on this. Matthew wanted his community to realize that even though someone followed the letter of the law, this same person would fail in truly living out this new commandment when he or she withholds compassion and grace. This failing negates our very call as followers of Jesus Christ, call which compels us to welcome the stranger, to love our enemies, and to act in ways of justice and mercy towards all of God's children.

Our faith, our call to discipleship is not simply about believing the right things or simply saying the right things so that others will be impressed with how Christian we really are. Being a disciple of Christ is about opening our hearts to the Kingdom of God in our midst. It is about seeing the presence of God still at work in this world, bringing healing and wholeness to all of God's children. Being a disciple of Christ is about loving our God with all of our mind, with all of soul, and with all of our heart. It is about letting this love transform us into the people God created and calls us to be...people of grace, people of welcome, people of hope.

By living out God's love for us and for our neighbor in word and in deed, we begin to become people who see all others as created in the image of God. By

letting the compassion of the law and the justice and mercy of the prophets to become what guides us on our journeys of faith, we begin to embrace our call to as disciples of Christ, working to bring healing and wholeness to a broken and hurting world.

This past Friday, I received an email from a UK journalism student about tonight's Food for the Soul. As you may know, we are inviting the community to gather as we continue the conversation which was started back in August at the Peace in the Park event hosted by our mayor. This student asked what I hoped to accomplish with this event. I sat for a while, avoiding answering her question, because in all honesty, I wasn't sure I had a great answer to give her.

But this morning, I felt the Spirit's nudging. I was reminded that we can acknowledge that even though we might not have all the answers right now, we can still come together and talk, getting to know each other, and listening to each other's stories. We can live out the compassion and grace of the law. We can embrace the words of the prophets. The Spirit reminded me that simplest way we could love God with all our heart, with all our mind and with all soul is by inviting our neighbors to our table. And so tonight, this is my hope. This is my prayer. That our love of God is expressed completely through the love of our neighbors. May it be so. Amen.