

Trinity 18

I Cor. 1: 1ff

St. Matt. 22: 34ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Were you required to take math classes in school? Few of us escaped exams on multiplication tables, long division, or fractions. But the toughest tests, the queen mother, for most students were word problems. They usually sounded something like this. Train A leaves Raleigh at 9 AM headed to Atlanta travelling at 75 miles per hour and arrives at 6 PM. Train B leaves Asheville an hour earlier headed to Wilmington moving at 60 miles per hour and passes Train A in Greensboro at 10 AM. Each train makes 2 stops lasting 60 minutes. How much longer will train B have to travel when train A reaches Charlotte? Say What? I do not have a clue to the answer—ask Fr. Sam+. (Pastor Fitzpatrick)

If you have finished school you are likely happy to be done with such puzzles. But when we reach adulthood we come up against other questions and tests that carry far more significance. What vocations are we to choose, or will we have a family and how will we manage the discipline and care of our children? Perhaps we find ourselves working for a company that asks us to conduct business practices that are in direct contradiction to our deepest values and our immediate future security is dependent on whether we decide to comply or not. Earlier this year I received a call from the bedside of a person who only a few days before had been apparently healthy and relatively self-sufficient. But then a fall and subsequent cerebral hemorrhage and pneumonia left him with little brain activity and no sign of life other than what machines sustained. The family was distraught and left with the agonizing decision of whether to continue down this path, which doctors said was irreversible, or to do what their parent had requested and allow nature to take its course. He was a family member of mine. It is true that we all have our own unique test questions to take and some weigh much more than others!

Jesus had his own experiences of such testing, and he managed to pass them. The Gospel today poses a controversy between our Lord and a set of well-informed attorneys. The question put to him is simply this: What is the heaviest commandment? By the first century the original 10 had become 613 commandments; 248 positive statements and 365 prohibitions, and then these were sub-divided into heavy and light weight concerns. It was like an attempt to get the answer guide to all the test questions. It is like asking you, when you are 18 years old, what the single most important act you can take for the rest of your life. And in a sense it is a fair question, and an important one to people in the 1st century. In our time there is much more energy spent in trying to figure out how to get around the commandments than complying with them. We are inclined to see them as a list of 'dos' and don'ts' that get in our way of exercising freedom, and that will inhibit our growth and creativity. So, what are we to make of this conflicted dialogue? The lawyer's inquiry may seem like nit-picking, although in truth there are few among us who would suggest that the law prohibiting murder is less significant than those covering traffic violations. Some things are more important than others.

Let me suggest that the question is not about hair-splitting. This man is not simply asking, "How are we supposed to live". Instead it has a deeper intent and purpose. He is really asking, "What is the point of life?" When all of our actions, intentions, quandaries, and dilemmas, our partners in this life, are considered, what is the purpose of being here? What is the one thing, which if we are deprived of it, will make life simply come undone?

Jesus answers that with, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and mind, and soul, and strength”, The great Jewish Doxology, and when he does everyone within earshot would have been whispering those words with him. But then he manages to slip in one more thing; “And your neighbor as yourself”. This, he says, is the purpose of life. Most of us are happy to sign on to the faith when we think of God’s love for us, but we need to read the fine print, too. Jesus does not say, “do this when it is convenient or when you have time and think about it”. It is to be carried in us whatever else may be. That looks like a pretty tall order, doesn’t it? I sometimes wonder if I ever love anything or anyone in that way, and am more aware of the failure than the achievement of such love. How are we to hear a command to love God and our neighbor?

Fr. Ronald Knox+, the English Catholic priest points out that the very desire and hope of loving God may at times be the catalyst that moves us to act in ways consistent with the commandment. He distinguishes between 2 kinds of love: the first is affective or spontaneous love. It is what we most often think of when the word love comes to mind. It is based on how we feel at the moment. It is love that just “happens” to us, and may well be dependent on our mood, the circumstances at the moment, or what kind of day we are having. At times we may feel that way toward God, but it can hardly be commanded. But the other he labels ‘effective’ or deliberate love. It is what holds relationships together when warm feelings have diminished. It is what directs our actions to do the good when we might would rather not. And it has a way of transcending the moment and producing a real impact on us and those around us. Jesus calls us to this. Wanting to love God, hoping to love God, seeking to love God and our neighbor is in fact, loving them; it is deliberate and lasts far beyond simply warmth of feeling. It is the kind of love that engages the world as it is, not as we wish it might be. And it withstands the tests of life.

Justin Horner, a graphic designer in Portland, Oregon, was having a string of bad luck. Over a matter of months, he had serious car trouble three times and they all occurred while he was driving other people’s cars. What bothered him the most was the lack of help he received. Once he was stuck on the side of the road and a number of tow trucks cruised past him without even bothering to ask if he needed assistance. Passersby did not use their cell phones to call for help.

One time he ran out of gas and had to walk a long distance to a service station. The person at the station said he could not lend him a gas can for safety reasons, but he could sell him a poor quality one with no a cap on it, for \$15.

However, he will never forget the time a family stopped to help. He had blown a tire and was stranded on the side of the road because his friend’s car did not have a jack. Justin made a large sign that read: “NEED A JACK” but cars simply whizzed past. Then, after nearly three hours, when he was ready to give up and start walking, a van pulled over, and a man stepped out. The man pulled out his jack and tire iron and Justin began losing the lug nuts. Then “Snap!” he broke the man’s tire iron. Justin’s heart sank, he felt terrible. But the man simply ran back to his van and handed it to his wife. She took off down the road to buy a new one. It wasn’t long before she returned and together, Justin and the man changed the tire. When they finished, they were dirty and sweaty, but smiling. The wife pulled out a jug of water so they could wash up. Justin tried to put a \$20 bill in the man’s hand, but he wouldn’t take it, so Justin walked up to the van and gave it to the wife. He thanked the family profusely. After saying goodbyes, Justin started walking back to the Jeep. The girl called out and asked if he had eaten lunch. When he said

had not eaten, she ran up and handed him a sandwich. He thanked them again and walked back to his vehicle. He was starving so he pulled back the foil on that food. What did he find inside? Not only a sandwich, but also his \$20 bill!

He dashed back to the van. The man spotted the money in Justin's hand and just started shaking his head no. Justin held out the twenty pleading, "Please, Please!" The man smiled and said: "Today you, tomorrow me."

Then he rolled up his window and drove away. Justin plopped down to eat the best sandwich he'd ever eaten and tears began to flow. Out of nowhere angels had appeared. Since that moment, Justin has changed a couple of tires, taken people to gas stations and once drove 50 miles to take someone to an airport. And no matter how hard people try, he will not accept money. \*\*

What's the point? What do you think? To love God with all our being and our neighbor may be just as deliberate and simple as that. Amen+

\*\*I cannot recall where I read this story, but it is worth telling.