

Trinity 18

I Cor. 1:1ff

Matthew 22:34ff

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

All of us find ourselves fielding questions; multitudes over a lifetime. It starts when we are asked as children what we want for dinner or as a birthday gift. These are simple and straight forward with no undercurrents. Then there are the kind we have in school on a quiz where we are “tested” about the date of the signing of the Declaration of Independence or the difference between a verb and an adverb. And, of course, there are the type that masquerade as questions but are actually statements with which we are expected to agree. They sound like this; “Don’t you think...” The list goes on to the Socratic style, like the one Jesus asks in the Gospel today, so that a response requires some serious and thoughtful reflection. We are enriched by them. And most of us have been on the receiving end of what might be called the trick inquiry or ‘set-up’. It is the question which leaves us with no true options and is intended to be a trap. Your Rector’s home recently had at least 30 of these asked within an hour when he foolishly made an appointment to see someone about gutter guards. The sales method was basically to ask a set of opposing questions (would you want this—an awful result, or THIS-the good choice) to which only intelligent response was the one that would force you to buy their product.

The lawyer in today’s Gospel attended that very training school. “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?” He is literally asking what is the ‘megalith’, the big stone, the heaviest of all God’s laws? By the first century there the original 10 had grown to 613 precepts. There were 365 prohibitions and 248 positive statements. They were further divided into categories of light and heavy, depending on the difficulty of meeting them. What is the most important thing in life? How can a correct answer even begin to be articulated? And that is the intent for this is not a friendly probe. In Matthew’s community there is obviously significant conflict about what it means to be a people of faith. This testing is one of 5 or 6 encounters in a row that show the tension and distinction between merely meeting the function of the commandments or fulfilling their intent; that is living in and with them.

Let us be clear and heed a useful warning not to take this Gospel, which we know from heart, and domesticate it and turn it into a nice lesson about polite or kind behavior. The question St. Matthew’s community is facing is “What does it mean to be Jewish/Christian?” One set of responses would come back, “To be a good and moral person”; the other would understand that the real fulfillment of the law is not simply how we act, but who we are in the depths of our being. Our faith is not primarily about being nice people. It is about loving God and those God has made above any impersonal set of rules. Everything must be read through this. Jesus’ response to this conflicted question is to answer with the great Jewish Doxology, the Shema: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your might.” And the second is like the first, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”. Matthew omits the word might, but that too pulls in our will and energy. Jesus is not saying that loving our neighbor is equivalent to loving God—don’t fall into that contemporary reduction, but if we love God, we will love those he has created. Our Lord is saying that everything in the faith is a footnote to these 2 commandments, and they point us to the inseparable connection of our spirituality. All the Christian life, every challenge we face, every decision we weigh really

comes back to the intertwining of these relationships—one with God and the other with our companions.

Just as in Jesus' day there was an attempt to focus on one dimension—the Law—we also have a similar struggle. Far too much of the Christian tradition has practiced what I call “Providentialism”. It is the compartmentalizing of the faith so that the vertical aspect is the whole horizon. It is the belief that salvation is about ‘me and Jesus’ without reference to the community or my solitary neighbor. This allows us to ignore the distraught, the lonely, or the annoying neighbor and put stake only in ourselves. A theologian friend of mine says, “It takes two to have faith”. Jesus, in hearkening back to Deuteronomy and Leviticus, shows us that love always is the center of faith.

St Augustine of Hippo, in a homily on this text wrote, *“I know, beloved, how well fed you are everyday by exhortations of Holy Scripture, and what nourishment your hearts find in the word of God. Nevertheless, the affection we have for one another compels me to say something to you, beloved, about love. What else is there to speak of apart from love? To speak of this there is no need to select some special passage of Scripture to serve as a text for the homily; open the Bible to any page and you will find it extolling love...People are renewed by love. **As sinful desire ages them, so love rejuvenates them.**”*

So, how is it that we come to love God and our neighbor as fully as possible. Surely it is not simply a matter of being told or commanded to do so! Well, yes and no. Perhaps it is some of both command and grace filled desire.

Humans by nature tend to view love as affection, warm feelings, and especially that ‘which comes naturally’ and therefore without coercion or effort. We hear about ‘falling’ in love. Such a view fails to take seriously the Shema’s call to love God with all our mind and strength as well as heart. Think about the child that comes to you and says, “I’m bored”. In our day of phenomenal parenting we may rise to the occasion and come up with varied activities to stave off the imperiling condition. But what if you say to that child, “yes I understand. I get that way as well. Now, run along and play.” What happens? Of course, there is wailing and gnashing of teeth, but soon they will get bored with being bored and discover other places of focus. Perseverance is a valuable virtue that moves us beyond what is easy in order to engage what is enriching. One of the best remedies to self-pity is to practice focusing on another person. The command to love is a gift and not merely a duty.

It also rests on something without which we cannot survive spiritually. It rests on the gracious covenant which God has maintained with his people over millennia. Do you recall Ahab in Moby Dick when in turmoil he says to God, “Try and force me with all the power of heaven and there is aught in here (his heart) that will defy you, but come to me in humble love and all that I am is yours”. You and I do not hear the call to love God and neighbor in a vacuum or from a cosmic dictator standing apart from life. We hear them in a relationship God has established with us from the Exodus out of slavery, through the wilderness and struggles of want, to Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan, to his death and resurrection. Before God has ever asked of us, He has provided beyond any possible measure of return. Far too much of what we have experienced in life is ‘conditional love and acceptance’. That is, love or acceptance which is predicated and dependent on our meeting the expectations of others. Parents say, if you achieve in school, I will be proud of you; others deal with us on the basis of what we provide them or on our appearances or accumulations

of wealth and status. We are currently engaging our neighbors as either friends or enemies depending upon political affiliations and points of view. In a very real sense, we come to judge ourselves by the same faulty criteria. The Gospel of the God of the Covenant, the God of Israel and of Jesus, the God who defeats sin and death on our behalf-not for Himself; is the God who says, "I know your sin and how it ages you. I know your failures and disappointments, your falling short, but I love you more than those things can ever detract." This is the real treasure of the Church. We are able to take up the command to love because it has already been done for us. Our ongoing conversion is to come to realize what God already knows. We are loved.

Why might it be that this truth is proclaimed at the very beginning of our worship every time we gather? Because God wants it engraved into our very souls.

We need deeply to learn that an enemy can be defeated with power, but only temporarily. He will come back as enemy unless the relationship is changed. Power is a poor substitute for love. Why? Because all else can be taken away by power except love.

Anthony Bloom, the physician and Orthodox Bishop from Russia tells of encountering a young priest who was arrested on the eve of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Imprisoned he was deprived of his prayer books and scripture and that had been his comfort. After much suffering he was released. When asked what was left he replied, "Nothing is left; they have burnt out everything save one-love alone remains".

Love is not a good idea or a theory; it is the Only thing that lasts.

"You shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Amen+