“God Don’t Make No Junk”

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Psalm 1

Matthew 22:34-45

October 25, 2020

It had been an eventful 24-hours.

Just yesterday, Jesus made triumphal entry into Jerusalem, entering the city, riding on a humble donkey, the crowds gathered in to see this strange parade, casting their cloaks on the road, spreading palm branches to prepare the way, shouting, “Hosanna! Save us!”

Then there had been the quick trip to the temple, in which the disciples witnessed their leader overturning tables and driving out the money-changers.

Then this morning, a sequence of questions-and-answers between Jesus and the Pharisees culminated with an attempt to trap Jesus into choosing between Caesar and God.

And now, another Pharisee steps forward, trying to test Jesus again. “Teacher,” he says, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

It was a test because the Pharisee, a lawyer, an expert in Torah, knew that that were “613 commandments in the Scriptures and it was believed that all should be upheld with the same rigor.” In fact, “It was not unusual for rabbis to offer summations of the law, but naming a single commandment as the greatest was filled with potential pitfalls. Any commandment chosen leaves one open to criticism in debate for neglecting others.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

The Pharisee wants to see just how bold this Jesus person is. He’s been consistent in both his orthodoxy — his knowledge of the law and his following of it as well as consistent in his being a threat to the religious establishment. The Pharisee wants to see where Jesus leans more — orthodoxy or threat.

And here is the test — which commandment is the best? Will this carpenter’s son be able to answer? Or will he finally back down?

This is the scene in which today’s Gospel text takes place. This is the showdown we are privileged to witness.

Privileged, because this is the bedrock upon which our Christian faith rests.

Instead of randomly selecting one of the 613 laws of Torah, Jesus goes right to the heart of Torah, right to the heart of God. Jesus finds the center of what will be Christian theology. Love.

He begins by reciting a portion of the Shema Yisrael — the text from Deuteronomy that began each worship service in Jesus’s day and which continues in the Jewish tradition today. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

This answer may not have been so surprising for those listening. After all, it is the centerpiece of worship for faithful Jews. It is a text with which they are quite familiar. We hear it today and it may sound ordinary or obvious because we’ve also heard it in some form or another in many ways.

But for the Jewish people, it signified the difference between them and everyone else. It is what set God - Yahweh - apart from every other god. The Lord, the one Lord, is our God. The Lord alone. And so what should be the faithful response to the one and only God? We will love the Lord our God with all our heart, our soul, our might. We will put our all into loving God. Because our God is the one, true God.

This response from Jesus is probably not very unexpected. Everyone knows this text. And not just from temple. The next part of the passage in Deuteronomy instructs the Jewish people: Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

When you visit Jewish homes to this day, you may see a mezuzah on their doorway — a piece of parchment in a decorative case that contains these words from Deuteronomy. The Jewish people have taken this call - this Shema - seriously. Hear, O Israel. Hear, and remember. And they have. This is not an unexpected answer from Jesus.

But it’s the second part of Jesus’s response, that is unexpected.

“And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Here, Jesus is again quoting scripture, but this time, it’s a passage from Leviticus, found in the middle of a long list of statutes.

It’s *this* part that is concerning for both the Pharisees hearing it so long ago and perhaps for us today.

What did it mean to “love your neighbor” for a Pharisee? Well, they had made a living off of interpreting Torah for centuries and part of that meant getting to decide who the neighbor of the Jewish people was. As temple officials, they got to decide who God was calling them to consider neighbor. And as a result, they had a pretty narrow definition. To be fair, when this passage in Leviticus comes up, the writer never specifies who the neighbor is either, and it could be assumed that the neighbor is just another Jewish person. And that’s how the temple officials had chosen to interpret that law over the years.

But then here came Jesus, the guy who re-defined neighbor. In a similar situation in Luke, when Jesus is asked by another lawyer, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds in almost the exact same way as he does in today’s Matthew passage. But this time, the lawyer presses him further — “and who is my neighbor?”

Jesus responds with one of the most famous parables in the Bible — the Good Samaritan which teaches that sometimes our neighbor is those with whom we would never choose to be neighborly. In fact, sometimes our neighbor *is* our enemy.

This was a threatening message for the Pharisees and other officials. This means that they had to reassess all of their teachings and perhaps open up God’s temple and God’s word and welcome other people. And they weren’t quite sure they were ready to do that.

We have trouble today loving our neighbor. Especially in an election season. Driving through Staunton and Waynesboro yesterday, I was reminded again of how divided we are. You can see literal neighbors divided along political lines these days via their yard signs. I hear feel-good stories on the radio about how neighbors who vote differently and have very different signs in their yards, but still love each other and I hope and pray that that love will continue past November 3rd and that that kind of love is more the norm in our country than I realize. Loving our neighbor can be harder to put into practice than we are ready to admit and it is a lifelong process to get it right.

But for some of us, it’s the last section in this string of commands that can be the hardest at different seasons in our lives. Love your neighbor *as yourself.*

We often focus our time on loving God and loving neighbor when we hear this passage, but I wonder, especially in these times, if we focus enough on what it means to love ourselves. I know that this might rub some people the wrong way. We’ve been taught that humility is a virtue, that we shouldn’t think more highly of ourselves than we do of others.

But that’s not what this passage is saying. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The same love that you put into loving your neighbor? Put that into loving yourself. And vice versa.

As yourself. These words from Jesus imply that we already love ourselves. It’s a given. So, do we? Do we love ourselves?

This verse is one that I turned to regularly when I was a campus minister in Memphis. Every year I had students who needed to withdraw from their college and take some time off for self-care. They had worked so hard to get into college and when they finally got there, they never let up. They continued to throw themselves into their school work, their extra curricula, to ensure that they were able to get to the next step. They pushed themselves so hard in their volunteerism and studies that they burned out. They then had to take a semester off to recover. I would regularly ask them, “How are you loving yourself these days? How are you practicing self-care?”

We’re not great at this, friends. Some of us are better than others, but I would guess that there are a lot of us out there who continue to push and push and we’re running out of energy, we are on the verge of burn out.

I keep running into congregants out in the park or around town or receive text messages from congregants and it feels like more and more, the conversation turns into a kind of sheepish confession: “Sarah, I’m so embarrassed to say, that I’ve stopped tuning into Facebook worship. I just can’t do it anymore.” There’s a flurry of excuses — Zoom fatigue, child-wrangling, spouse-wrangling, sheer exhaustion. But these excuses are always given to me with some kind of sheepish shrug or guilty grimace.

And I’m here to tell all of you — it’s okay. It’s okay not to tune in for a bit. If the 10:30 time frame doesn’t work for you, tune in later. We save these videos and you can watch them whenever works for you. But also, if this worship service is something that is adding to the stress of your life and it’s not drawing you closer to loving God, neighbor, and self, then it’s time to find another way. Worship of God should be life-giving, not life-draining.

I realize that I’m walking a pretty fine line here and that my own job security might be at risk. But hear me out. I’m not telling you *not* to be a part of the church at this time. But if you’re beating yourself up about all the “shoulds” in your life — I should do this or I should do that and tuning into this style of worship is one of those “shoulds,” then we need to find a way for you to be a part of the church that will work for you in this moment because it will be harder for you to move towards love of God and neighbor, if you’re having a hard time loving yourself.

Debie Thomas, a director of children’s and family ministries in Palo Alto, California, writes about today’s particular passage of love saying, “May I take a moment here to point out what Jesus doesn’t say in response to the Pharisees’ question? Remember, at this point in the story, Jesus’s crucifixion is just days away. Death is literally breathing down his neck, and he is rapidly running out of opportunities to communicate the heart of his message.

But when he is asked what matters most in a life of faith, Jesus doesn’t say, “Believe the right things.” He doesn’t say, “Maintain personal and doctrinal purity.” He doesn’t say, “Worship like this or attend a church like that.” He doesn’t even say, “Read your Bible,” or “Pray every day,” or “Preach the Gospel to every living creature.” He says, “Love.” That’s it. All of Christianity distilled down to its essence so that maybe we’ll pause long enough to hear it. Love. Love God and love your neighbor.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Love yourself.

Love in the time of Covid is difficult. So be gentle with yourself. Find a way to practice self-care so that you can be free to turn that same love to your neighbor and to God.

Last night I saw a post in a Presbyterian group on Facebook made by a PCUSA pastor. He suggested that instead of using the word “attend,” we use the word “connect.” “From now on,” he said, “some people will connect with worship in person, some will connect live online, some will connect with a recording later in the week. No connection mode is necessarily better than another.”

How will you connect to the church and to God this week? Some will tune in live right now, some will watch later, some will read this sermon even later. Some might come to our Wednesday evening service. Some might connect through service — by dropping off food at the Verona Food Pantry or by bringing in items for our Shelburne project. Some will connect through Zoom youth group meetings. Some will connect with God by beginning their days with Bible study and devotion. Some will connect by writing one of the Advent devotions. Some will connect with God through a much-needed visit with a therapist or spiritual advisor.

It doesn’t matter *how* you are connecting to God during this pandemic. But what *does* matter is that you are. So be gentle with yourself. Offer grace to yourself. Love the self that God loves. Because what the world needs now, is love, sweet love. And love of God and neighbor begins with loving ourselves, the very selves that God created and called good and continues to call good. And God don’t make no junk.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Douglas T. King; Feasting on the Gospels; Page 205 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)