

Sermon for Proper 25 (Year A)

October 29, 2023

*Preached at Belleville Congregational Church, Newburyport, Mass.
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If you and I could have experienced Jesus in person, would we have perceived and discerned that he was the Son of God, God in human flesh? Would our spiritual sensibilities have been keen enough? Would our wisdom have been deep enough? Would our minds and hearts have been big enough? I'm guessing not!

Nor were the spiritual sensibilities of the people of Jesus' time keen enough. The Pharisees represented an almost fanatical religious sect of Judaism that was convinced that if people would just obey and practice a strict religious code, then God would usher in the messianic age.

Jesus presented a threat to the campaign of the Pharisees, because he played fast and loose with their strict religious code. He bent the rules of Sabbath rest if someone was in need. He associated with sinners, unclean folk, and rabble-rousers. He befriended the traitorous tax collectors, Jews who did Rome's dirty work. He even touched unclean and diseased people.

The Pharisees, and a number of other religious special-interest groups, were also dumbfounded as to how Jesus seemed to have the power to heal the sick, forgive sins, and raise the dead. Worst of all for the Pharisees, Jesus was gaining a large following. They needed to put a stop to him.

The Pharisees persisted in trying to trap Jesus in religious legalism. One of their lawyers – experts in the Mosaic law – tested Jesus by asking him which law was the greatest. Most of us are so familiar with the answer Jesus gave, we could recite it by heart:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’

This is the greatest and first commandment.

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

On these,” Jesus declared, “hangs all the law and prophets.” Wow!

But when Jesus gave this summation, in all its simplicity and yet profundity, it was just too straightforward for these Pharisees. They believed you couldn't do that with God's law. There were over 600 of them – and every one was important. Blasphemy, they called it. And so, they were ready to hang him from the nearest cross. Or at least get the Romans to do it for them.

But, you see, Jesus wants to go deeper with these adversaries. He turns the trap on *them* by pressing their understanding of the Messiah. "Whose son is he?" Jesus asked. The Pharisees could answer only with their "chatty-Cathy string" answer (remember "Chatty Cathy"?): "The son of David." This was the correct answer within Jewish tradition. Jesus, however, left them with a proposition they could not fathom: that the Messiah is the Son of *God* and that God is fully embodied in Jesus! It was an unfathomable mystery for the Pharisees (and perhaps for us too) that God could be embodied in a person who lived among us, who modeled the self-emptying love of God, who manifested God in everything he said and did, and who mediated God's redeeming power to save us!

Great indeed is the mystery of the gospel! The mystery is how God chooses to love, bond with, and save the creation as the Incarnate One, God-in-us-and-with-us, God everywhere in every way, God who decides to be *in* and *with* every dimension of creation and who refuses to be anywhere else. Jesus embodies and discloses all of this – God's full and unconditional love and God's persistent and uncompromising resolve to save the world.

Over all the centuries since Jesus lived on earth, even we his followers have pondered and debated how he could be all of this. We have struggled to grasp the commingling of his human and divine natures without compromising either. Yet his redeeming power can be fathomed no other way. He cannot be contained in an either-or definition. The power of his humanity begs a divine dimension and his divinity cannot redeem the human condition without being truly one of us. When we hold in tension these dimensions of Jesus, they eventually give way to and fulfill the other. We can't have him any other way. Great indeed is the mystery of the gospel.

Over the course of my many years as an Episcopal priest, I have had the opportunity to teach many young people in Confirmation classes. "Back in the day" these classes had a rather "rote" quality to them. We read the Catechism at the back of the Book of Common Prayer and the young folks did their best to memorize the "correct answers."

One of those “rote” teachings was one concerning the Sacraments. What was (and is) a Sacrament? And those early classes could spout its “chatty-Cathy” answer as to what a sacrament is: “An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”

In later years, we came to have wonderful discussions of the questions raised in that Catechism. We didn’t just “spout the answer,” we explored what it really meant for us. One such conversation sticks in my mind. Jesus, we came to conclude, *is* the quintessential sacrament of God. He *is* an outward and visible reality that makes the fullness of God’s inward and spiritual grace present to us.

Paul proclaimed as much in the epistle to the Colossians: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (1:19-20). The very name of Jesus, the stories of Jesus, the people gathered in his name, the bread of his body broken, the cup of his blood poured out, all mysteriously release a presence that is redeeming, forgiving, healing, reconciling, saving.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ time, though well intended, trapped themselves in a narrow and shallow way of perceiving reality. Their worldview wouldn’t let them perceive that Jesus could open them to the deeper mysteries of God. Could it be that too many of us are the same way? Could it be that even though we profess and call ourselves Christians we don’t allow Jesus to take us into the glorious and redeeming depths of God?

At every stage of our lives, from our baptism to our day-to-day discipleship, Christ is working his grace in us until we are perfected in love. But all this is preparation for being sent by Christ to join God’s saving work in the world. We declare this spiritual reality in one of the prayers we often pray in the tradition from which I come – one the Eucharistic prayers we use Sunday by Sunday: “Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.”

When we go into our day-to-day lives as “one body, one spirit in Christ” and faithfully minister to Christ’s redeeming presence, we release him to be in our relationships with all kinds of people. *We* do not do the redemptive work; *Christ* does. And at the heart of that redemptive work lies this deceptively simple declaration of our Lord, the declaration that blows the Pharisees away: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment.

And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus, in this short and remarkable declaration, makes it so simple for us. Friends, he says you don't really need to remember ten commandments. You can remember just two. Two will do it. Here are your signposts for your journey. Love God. Love your neighbor. All the commandments hang on those two. Amen.