

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2011

So here we are once again with Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus has just ridden into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He has upset things in the Temple by driving out the money-changers. He has responded to questions about taxes asked by the Pharisees and about the resurrection of the dead by the Sadducees. And now that the Sadducees have been reduced to speechlessness, the Pharisees are back again.

Before we go on any further, however, we need to pause for a moment to remember who the Pharisees were. On the surface at least, they are the easiest target in the gospels. Whenever we encounter them there, we can recognize that telltale odor of sanctimoniousness mixed with self-importance- the shadow side of almost all religious piety. The Pharisees are presented by the gospel writers as supremely self-righteous, wanting to appear as the good guys, but ready to twist the truth and manipulate others into carrying out their dirty work so that they can retain their power and influence. Jesus has castigated them as “hypocrites” and a “viper’s brood” and compared them to whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but filled with the bones of the dead and all kinds of filth on the inside.

Now all of this is true, but we also have to remember that from what we can tell about life in 1st-century Judaism, the Pharisees were actually the *best*, not the worst, of the various Jewish religious factions. They were the “liberals” of their day. They valued moderation and relevance and the on-going adaptation of the Torah to real-life

situations . Their real problem, and their real undoing, at least according to the gospels was what you might call “twenty-twenty hindsight”. While they were open to surface newness, as they tried to apply the Torah to new situations and circumstances, they took their bearings squarely from the tradition they had inherited. They relied on the past to interpret the present- which is certainly not bad in itself. But when they encountered Jesus and he did not conform to their traditional roadmaps, they didn’t know what to do with him. They trusted their inherited maps more than they trusted their hearts. This fundamental problem of theirs in relation to Jesus raises, of course, huge questions for us as we struggle to deal with new issues and new problems in our own day.

When the Pharisee in today’s gospel reading approaches Jesus and asks him what is the greatest commandment in the Torah, he was, in effect, asking a question to see if, and how far, Jesus’ teaching conformed to the roadmap that the Pharisee already knew. This Pharisee who was a scholar of the Torah certainly knew the biblical texts backwards and forwards. But he wants to see what Jesus is going to do with them, how he understands their meaning.

But Jesus throws him a curve ball. If the Pharisee had been expecting something that would have clearly tripped up Jesus, or would have shown him to be obviously subversive, or would have undermined his own authority in some way, that didn’t happened. Jesus paraphrases the Torah, coupling a text from the book of Deuteronomy (6:5)- “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength”- and a text from Leviticus (19:18)- “you must love your neighbor as yourself”.

On the surface, Jesus' quoting of these two texts must certainly have established for the Pharisee Jesus' "orthodoxy". There was nothing problematic or mischievous in Jesus telling people to love God and to love other people and to see these two things as intimately connected. . . nothing problematic, at least superficially . . . until one looks at the context of Jesus' words, especially the context of the Leviticus text.

When Jesus tells this scholar of the law that love of God cannot be separated from love for people, there is a sting in the tail. The command from Leviticus to love one's neighbor like one loves oneself is not just a pious exhortation to occasional loving acts. What it's talking about is not pious good works in some kind of limited religious sense, but it's talking about a social vision, a vision about what a good society, what God's society, should look like. The command to love "your neighbor like you love yourself" comes at the conclusion of a whole list of things that the entire community of Israel is called to do in order for the *community* to be holy.

God's people are to honor their parents, keep the Sabbath, not make idols and worship them. They are to leave enough on the land after the harvest so that the poor and immigrants can have something to eat. They are not to steal, swear falsely, oppress their neighbors, rob them, or withhold even over night the wages of workers. They are not to insult deaf people or mess with blind people. They must not act unjustly in legal cases or show favoritism to anyone; they are to judge justly. They must not slander other people or stand by while their neighbors are being hurt. They are not to take revenge nor hold a grudge against anyone. Instead, "you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.

Here we see a broad, all-encompassing vision of what society should be, what human relations should look like. Jesus has already interpreted this command to mean a life of indiscriminate loving of people, rooted in a lived faithfulness to God whom we are called to love with our entire being, our entire mind and our entire strength. Loving God and loving your neighbor mean praying for your enemies, feeding the poor, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, in effect, living a life of fearless compassion and radical generosity.

And this is the sting in the tail of what Jesus had to say to the Pharisee. Over and over again, he had made it clear by what he said and did that he saw the religious and political leaders of his day as having failed to create this sort of society. They had allowed parents to be deprived of support, they had used the Sabbath laws to deny people access to food, they had reviled the blind and lame by banning them from the Temple, and they had turned the Temple itself into something other than a house of prayer for all people.

Jesus' response to the Pharisee, in other words, was not just a piece of nice religious moralizing. Even as he proved his "orthodoxy" by quoting from the Torah, he was *challenging* those who were asking him what was central and most important in the tradition. What was central and most important, he told them, they had *missed*. Loving God and creating a good and just society are simply two sides to the same coin.

So what does this say to us today? It says the same thing as it said 2000 years ago. Our task as the people of God, as the "holy" people of God, is to infiltrate the society in which we live in order to make it holy. We are not called to withdraw into the sacred

precincts of our churches as if they were ghettos of safety over against an evil world. Our job is to make holy our world of politics and economics and social relations by working as hard as we can for justice and compassion in human relations.

Just now in our history there is a tremendous temptation in both society and church for us to forget this call, or to put it on the back burner. There is an insidious push to think that justice is being done when we have made sure that those who have resources and wealth are able to keep what they have while those who have little are simply left to grow poorer and poorer. The gap between the wealthy and the poor in this country just now is about what it was in 1928, and this is very dangerous indeed! Or we can be tempted to think that faithfulness to God means getting the language and the rituals in church just right, just perfect, while down-playing almost entirely what integrity and righteousness look like in the market place. We somehow find it difficult to integrate for ourselves beautiful liturgy *and* social justice, because we frequently bifurcate life itself.

And which commandment in the law is the *greatest*?

He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is *like* it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The *whole* law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

Sources

Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins. A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (2005)

Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus* (2008)