

The Main Thing

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on October 25, 2020
Friendship Presbyterian Church

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'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." (Matthew 22:34-40, NRSV)

As you all know by now, we have started the Fall stewardship emphasis in worship, with the theme "Ever, Only, All for Thee" – taken from the last line of that great hymn of the Church, "Take My Life and Let it Be." No line, and no hymn, expresses more beautifully that sense of a total consecration to God.

Last Sunday, in exploring the story of Jesus' confrontation with Pharisees and Herodians over whether tax should be paid to Caesar or not, we boldly confessed that we do not belong to the Caesars – of that day, or of our own. We instead belong "body and soul, in life and in death," to God, and that just as Caesar's image was stamped on the coin in that story, *God's own image* is stamped on *us*, and because this is so, we are to "give to God what is God's."

But what does this mean for us? How do we give back to God what is God's? The scripture text for this Sunday answers this question. The scene follows last week's story, with Jesus still in the Temple and answering those who would challenge him. This time it is a lone Pharisee, an expert in the religious Law, who asks him what may look like an innocent question, "Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?"

It's anything *but* an innocent question. It is asked to "test" him, or more precisely, to draw him into a legal debate over the relative fine points of hundreds of religious rules and regulations that the Pharisees knew so well and held so dear, and so trip Jesus up in front of the crowd.

You see, they had scoured the scriptures over the years and "discovered" 613 commandments. (Silly you – you thought there were just ten!). There were 248 positive commandments (*DO* this) and 365 negative commandments (*DON'T* do that ... one for each day!) – so many rules to cover every conceivable circumstance. The Pharisee could hardly wait for Jesus to answer, and pounce on him for why he apparently doesn't value highly enough the other 612!

But Jesus saw past the morass of options posed to him. He answered, simply, "'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." These two, held together, are what is most important in life. They, together, Jesus tells us, are the main thing.

Like the Pharisee's question which was anything but innocent, Jesus' simple *answer* is anything but simple! Drawing on Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, it accomplishes two things:

- First, it shows that Jesus – whose authority and orthodoxy has been questioned at every turn – is calling on the very heart of the faith. Love of God and love of neighbor ... Not even the Pharisee could argue with that.
- But second, and more importantly, it reveals his questioner's spiritually-starved worldview. For the Pharisee, life under the Law is a life dedicated to scrupulously following all of God's commandments (all 613 of them!), and carefully avoiding any hint of breaking even one of them, even by accident. But Jesus' seemingly simple answer undermines this entire approach. Jesus' answer reveals that the Law is not finally about rules, but about *Love* ... about really loving God and one's neighbor, and not, as Dr. Tom Long has put it, about "trying to figure out how to avoid stepping on cracks in the legal sidewalk." We honor God's Law, not as a means of acquiring merit or achieving some mythical perfection, but as our trustworthy guide into living lives of Love.

Loving God and loving neighbors as we love ourselves is the great point of life – our ultimate response to the Divine. Our belonging to God, our giving to God what is due God, means that above all else we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind. And "like" this, bound up with this, inseparable from this, is to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is what it's all about. It's the main thing.

But as anyone who has tried to live in this world knows, keeping this main thing as the main thing is harder than it may seem.

There was once a woman who bought a parrot in a pet store. She wanted companionship, someone to talk with. The day after she bought the parrot, she brought him back and said to the store manager, "He won't talk. My parrot won't talk."

The store manager asked, "Well, does he have a mirror in his cage? Parrots *love* mirrors." And so, buoyed up by the idea, she bought a mirror and left. But the next day she came back and said, "The bird is *still* not talking. I just don't understand it."

The manager looked befuddled at first, but then lighted up with an idea: "How about a ladder? Parrots *love* ladders. When he's really happy, he'll talk." And so, she bought a ladder and left. But the next day she was back, complaining that even with the mirror and ladder, the bird was not talking. The manager said, "I know what you need: the bird wants a *swing*. He'll be happy when he has a swing and *then* he'll talk. She reluctantly bought a swing and left.

Sure enough, the next day she was back, and she had a sad face. "My parrot died," she said. "I'm so sorry," the manager responded. "But did he ever say *anything* before he died?" The

woman replied, “Yes, he did, just this morning. In a very weak voice, he asked me, ‘Don’t they sell any food at that pet store?’”

In her own way, our well-meaning parrot-purchaser was missing the main thing, wasn’t she? The most *important* thing. As good as they are for pet birds, mirrors, ladders, and swings are ultimately side-shows compared to the main thing. Without the main thing, a parrot won’t make it, but *with* it, all those other things could find their proper place.

Oftentimes in the church and in life, we miss the main thing – the main thing of loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. It’s the true food that will keep us alive and thriving, but often we expend so much energy and attention on what for us are ultimately mirrors, ladders, and swings, that we then find ourselves starving for the main thing. We may spend so much time with those substitutes that we don’t even remember what the main thing *is*.

Of course, I suppose that’s why many people turn to religion in the first place, to help them clear away all the mess in their lives so they can live into what matters most. But sadly, oftentimes religion in practice just makes things worse, pushing forward mirrors, ladders, and swings with a holy veneer.

That was the mistake of the Pharisees, but things have a way of repeating themselves. The medieval Christian Church grew up an impressive edifice of rules and requirements of their own, defining who was *in* and who was *out*.

And then the Reformation came to be, calling the Church back to the grace to be known in living out the main thing of Love. It had a promising beginning. Inspired by fresh, freedom-filled readings of the gospels and the letters of Paul, the early Protestants had high hopes for a new unity of vision and purpose in keeping the main thing the main thing. But soon, they too lost the plot, bitterly dividing over fine details of doctrine and leaving behind the main thing, the *only* thing, that can finally sustain our hearts and souls and minds.

And so on, and so on, through the ages. We human beings have a hard time keeping the main thing the main thing, and so we have a really hard time with giving to God what belongs to God – our whole hearts and souls and minds. We know that all too well.

But here’s the Good News: The Gospel is not given to tell us something we already know, but to tell us something that we *don’t* know – not really – or cannot fully see: That though we fail, though we again and again refuse the new life we could know ... though all this is true, it is not the *whole* truth. That deeper than our failings, and our blindness, there is a Presence – holy, beautiful, and fully alive within us – which calls us by name in Love and will never let us go. The ultimate foundation of the commandment to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves, is the unfathomable love of *God for us, and for our neighbors* – a Love which never fails.

This is why we are here. This is why we gather around these words and these stories each week. This is why every year we stop and ask ourselves what God is calling us to do now to

support our community’s ministry and mission and live out our faith with passion. And as we do, we live a little more, day by day, into the main thing ... into who we really are ... into who we were created by God to be. This is the greatest adventure of all.

To the Glory of God! Amen.