

Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he 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.”

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’?”

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Today’s Gospel has Jesus pitted against those 3 great villains:

the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the lawyers!

Lawyers never get any respect: they’ve always been considered clever but sneaky.

Here, the legal expert (or scribe) is trying to trap Jesus...

with his false flattery (he calls him “rabbi/teacher”)...

and a treacherous question (“Which commandment is the greatest?”).

Now, you may not see this as a treacherous, or even difficult, question.

After all, Jesus merely needs to pick 1 of 10 Commandments...

and say which one he likes best; right?

Actually, it’s not that easy.

There were over 600 statutes (laws)...

and at least 3 lists of 10 Commandments in the Old Testament.

Today’s Old Testament lesson contains Commandments 5-10...

of one of these other lists.

(You shall be holy; you shall not render an unjust judgment, etc.)

The wide range of choices led the rabbis to look for a way of shortening the list,

and heated debates during Jesus’ time made it dangerous to take sides.

As always, Jesus answered brilliantly: he actually names 2 greatest commandments, indicating that the second arises out of the first.

He summarizes all the laws/commandments in loving God (with all heart/mind/soul), and loving your neighbor as yourself.

So, what does it mean to love God with all your heart/mind/soul?

The word we translate as “heart” means the seat of emotions, the emotional center.

We locate our emotions in our hearts, so this translation makes sense to us.

Jews often located their emotions in the spleen,

so “spleen” would be the literal translation of the passage,

but loving the Lord, your God with all your spleen...

just sounds weird to us!

We are here commanded, then,

to turn all our feelings/passions/desires toward God. Do we do this?

Or are we sensible Lutherans lukewarm in our feelings toward God?

Fortunately, we are also commanded to love God with all our mind,
in other words, with all our understanding and rational facilities.

This might seem to condemn those...

who refuse to study the Bible closely or even discuss their beliefs...

b/c they fear that such rational approaches...

might hinder their personal relationship w/ Jesus.

But we can't be the ones to condemn these passionate believers.

We are all called to love God fervently as well as intellectually!

Finally, we are commanded to love God with all our soul. What does this mean?

In the New Testament,

the soul means more than just a spirit entrapped in a physical body.

Your soul is the sum total of your whole being:

in other words, it includes your body and everything inside it.

It is who you really are behind the masks you hold up to the world.

To love God with all your soul, then, means to love God in all your being.

Jesus said that the second great commandment arises out of his first.

What he meant by this is that loving God leads naturally to loving all people.

Loving the Creator w/ all our being...

makes it impossible for us to not love all Creation:

the world and all the people in it.

I love Laura Barnhardt Corle's paintings b/c they all contain a piece of her in them.

(You can view some of her artwork in the Lounge.)

How could I love Laura and not love something she put so much of herself into?

In the same way,

how can I say I love God...

if I can't love the works of God's hands and heart?

We can't say we love God if we hold hate in our hearts for any of God's children.

We read in *1 John*:

Those who say "I love God" and hate their brothers/sisters are liars;

those who love God must love their brothers/sisters, also.

We prove our love for God by our efforts to love all of God's beloved children.

If this sounds radical, out of step w/ society, out of touch w/ the "real world," you're right!

Loving those who hurt us or disgust us goes against everything our culture teaches.

It seemingly goes against our very nature as evidenced by the passion w/ which...

our children tell us they hate us when we deny them the smallest thing.

But we are called to live out our higher natures.

In today's OT lesson, God says, *You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*

"Holy" here means separated/special/put aside for some particular use.

Just as God is holy, distinct from all the other gods people worship,
we are called to be different...

from those who pay homage to these false gods.

We are separated/special/put aside for God's purposes.

Who would like this \$20 bill if I was giving it away? [show of hands]

[crumble it] Now, who would still like it? [step on it] How about now?

You see, this bill has inherent value: it's worth \$20 regardless of how I abuse it.

In the same way, you have inherent value:

no matter how you've been abused in the past,

or how you've abused the gifts God's given you;

no matter how much you've degraded yourself, what mistakes you've made,

you are still priceless, still worthy of redemption.

And if you have value beyond what the eye can perceive [hold up bill], so do others.

Learn to love yourself for your inherent, God-given value...

and then learn to love your neighbor as yourself.

Remember the movie, The Lion King?

The young prince goes off with a couple of ne'er-do-well friends...

and totally degrades himself.

But inside, he's still the future king; and when the time comes, he proves it.

Actually, Shakespeare did this story first in his history play, Henry IV.

Prince Hal falls from grace w/ his drunken companion, Falstaff...

but comes to himself in time to save his father and England.

The young lion king/young King Henry are set aside, designed for a special purpose.

When they find themselves, they discover their higher calling/fulfill their destiny

How about us? What is our destiny to be?

Back in the 1880's in Philadelphia, there lived a little girl named Hattie May Wiatt.

Hattie was a member/Baptist Temple, which was growing very quickly at that time.

One morning when she arrived at Sunday school,

she found the school so crowded that she could not get in the door.

She stood outside, confused and afraid to push through the crowds of children.

The kindly pastor, Reverend Russell Conwell, came by...

and saw the scared little girl standing outside with her Sunday school book...

and he picked her up, carried her on his shoulders,

and found a place for her in the crowded classroom.

The next day Reverend Conwell saw Hattie again and told her...

that he was hoping to soon have enough money to build a bigger church...

so that there would be lots of room for all of the children.

Some time later Hattie May became very sick. She died in 1886.

After the funeral the family came to the pastor with a worn little purse containing 57¢.

They told him that Hattie May had been saving the money...

to help build a new church that would have enough room for all the children.

The pastor could not believe it.

He had not even begun to raise money for the new building.

He told his parishioners about Hattie's small gift...

and very quickly more/more people began making donations for the new church.

They all knew: if a little girl could give 57¢ surely they could give something.

Today this simple little church, now called Grace Baptist,

is one of the largest in Philadelphia with seating for 3,300 people.

Further fundraising by Pastor Conwell led to the founding of Temple University,
the 26th largest university in the United States,

and Good Samaritan Hospital, now called Temple University Hospital.

And they credit it all to Hattie May's 57¢!]

Here is the end of a sermon Pastor Conwell gave on Dec. 1, 1912, 26 years after Hattie died.

“When that little lad brought 5 loaves and 2 small fish to be used of Christ...

for his great work of feeding the five thousand, it was precisely the same thing...

that Hattie May Wiatt did when she brought her 57 cents.

It is one of the great comforts of life that every person is used of God.

Though you may think your life is humble, unknown, hidden, yet God sees all,

and your life has probably just as great an influence for the uplift of humankind...

and the progress of the kingdom as has been the life of those...

who are seemingly great, seemingly famous in this world.

There is no difference before God.

The humblest of Christian servants is doing just as much for God's kingdom,

when doing faithfully their little duty, as are the seemingly great.

Hattie May Wiatt is happy on high with the thought that her life was so full,

that it was so complete,

that she lived really to be so old in the influences she threw upon this earth.”

In other words, she fulfilled her destiny.

Dr. David Livingstone was a Scottish missionary,

immortalized when he was met by fellow explorer Stanley,

who asked, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?”

Here was Livingstone's favorite prayer:

Send me anywhere, only go with me. Lay any burden on me, only sustain me.

Sever any ties but the tie that binds me to thy service and thy heart.

Today is the day when we are asked to make a commitment to our Lord.

We all have a destiny to fulfill.

These destinies may seem small to us now, of little consequence,

but the financial support we offer, the time we give, the talents we share,

will make all the difference for the kingdom.

God can do so much with a rumpled coin purse,

a few loaves of bread, a couple of fish.