

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 18, October 23, 2011.

“Entrusted with the Gospel”

Matthew 22:34-46

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Dedicated to the glory of God’s love. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

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Imagine an apple orchard covered in early morning dew, one like last night, just short of frost and planted with neat rows of trees. On one tree there is a branch that hangs down just within your reach, and on that branch are two fresh ripe red apples. Those two fruits contain all the “juice and joy” of the entire orchard. They are the summation of all the sweat and toil of the workers that planted and tended them over the years, and the workers who waited and worried throughout the whole season for just this moment to come.

You are the one who gets to reach up now and snap them off of their summer moorings, bring them down into your basket, and take them home to your harvest table.

This morning, Jesus unites two pieces of scripture that are every bit as lovely as our imaginary apples. The first is, “*You shall love the Lord with all your heart, your soul and your mind* (from the Shema in Deuteronomy 6), and “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (from Leviticus 19:18).

If it weren’t for the context and timing of this scene, it might be easily categorized and written off as just another argument between Jesus and his minstrel show jesters. While you and I are

already aware of Christmas on the horizon, our text this week, the encounter between Jesus and the lawyer, takes place on the Monday of Holy Week, so there is nothing humorous about it. Within only four days, Jesus will have been arrested and tried as a criminal then hung on a cross to die. Jesus' two quotes take on the weight of being a summary of his life, ministry and mission. Jesus says, "*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*"

The two commandments had been plucked and in the ponderous silence afterward, who would be the ones to take home the meaning of his words in their basket? Would the lawyer who came to question Jesus come to understand his answer? Will you and I? "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,*" and "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

The lawyer who came to speak with Jesus was a Pharisee. Jesus had already "silenced" the opposing party, the Sadducees. And debate was public - people were listening. The moment is ripe - Jesus has saved the best for last - he moves the conversation to an entirely new place as he lets it be known that he is the Messiah. As he quotes Psalm 110, Jesus exerts his authority asking for an explanation: How, could God the Father possibly be inferior to any human being, even one as mighty and as revered as King David; and the lawyer is silent.

Unfortunately, our distance from the reign of King David may not make the riddle and response at the end of the story as clear to us as it was to the Pharisee of the day. Short of saying it directly, Jesus poses a riddle with the clear implication in the riddles answer that his is the messiah they have been awaiting. There are things we much each discover about God in our own time. Jesus' self-disclosure put him at even greater risk than he was prior to the conversation. Kings rarely want to have loyalty move beyond their own realm. (I encourage you to return to this passage today and see how you solve the puzzle at the end.)

Knowingly or not, the challenger came with the perfect question at the perfect time. As long as we only ask questions that are intended to press our own agenda, we cannot hear genuine responses. Under such circumstances, there is little opportunity for learning. So regardless of all questions that came before from Sadducees or Pharisees, and all the answers Jesus gave them, there is no guarantee that they ever really heard, or learned anything.

On the other hand, when a question is part of a process of discernment, the Spirit of the matter can find its way into the conversation. Now, on the cusp of the end of his earthly ministry, the questioner gives Jesus just enough opening and it becomes the opportunity to leave the great commandment as the synopsis of his work and of his hope.

The last barrier blocking the possibility that Jesus is the Messiah has been broken. Jesus can now be seen as the Long Awaited One and all that remains to wonder about is who will follow him. Who will reach up and take the fruit? The story belongs to all generations. Jesus has also told us how to follow: To love God is to love all whom God loves. It's not clear how the Pharisee responded and truth be told for some it may have been the launch of new faith and for others, the final straw that launched the crucifixion. It is not always clear how we choose to respond when we hear him either. It can be difficult to allow Love to wash over us.

Agape love is what is required. Agape is the kind of love that is filled with grace and intentionality instead of the friendship of *philia* - or the sensual desire of *eros*. The Greeks have three primary words for love. We only have one . . . and we've tried to make it mean all kinds of things and nothing at all. Most of the time we connect love to an emotion: I love fresh hot Krispy Kreme donuts; I love your new cologne; I love this book I'm reading. We easily lose sight of the power, the choice, blessing and covenant of the love of God.

God loves us even when we are at our worst, least likeable, least beautiful, least attractive moments, as well as our seconds as shining stars. Not only that, God loves us even when we fall short

and when we do horrible, disgusting, wretched things. It's a good thing to know, especially in our darkest times, but it can still be hard to believe and respond to it. God's grace allows us to make wiser choices.

At the same time, it can be downright excruciating to think God loves the other person, the compromised, conniving and complaining ones. Loving one another at the extremes is an entirely different story. Nonetheless, it is the greatest commandment – loving God includes loving those God loves. “*God makes [the] sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*” (Matthew 5:45) Such a love as this calls us to climb to higher ground than we have ever believed possible. It calls us to an active, merciful life of loving-kindness that flows through us because God loves us first. God's love is made visible when we extend mercy, grace, generosity and patience. Such a love as this is not a feeling - it is a choice – a choice to co-create a culture of generosity and community.

It is the choice we make in the name of Jesus, to think locally *and* globally to:

- Connect with local soup kitchens, stand outside in rain or shine for a produce market, bring food for local pantries and provide Thanksgiving dinners with and for our neighbors in need, as well as those starving in drought stricken East Africa.
- It is the choice we make to support the Children's Defense Fund; to have a teachers for children on Sunday morning; to stock and staff a church library filled with books so children can learn about the God who loves them and everyone else around the world; (Have you been to our children's library lately? If not, take a field trip there after church. Sit cross-legged on the pillow and see the plethora of books we have for teaching God's love. Even the fact that we have the library extends God's care to children!)
- It is the choice we make when we feed the spiritual, emotional and physical hungers as we tell our own gospel stories of

transformation of body, mind and spirit to one another in small groups and on retreats.

- It is the choice we make to we welcome the fallen and frail; the battered and bewildered, then eat the bread of life and sip the cup of forgiveness together;
- It is the choice we make when we struggle to know that a tithe that is soft and easy may not be all God is hoping for, or in need of, in order to bring the out the best we have to give...maybe this *really is the year for reaching the tenth mark* of what we have received to be returned to God's work through the church.
- And in some peculiar way, it is even the choice we make to keep the furnace on, this beautiful historical building standing tall as a witness to God's presence and love through generation upon generation, transporting our souls through music, neighbors and families, united in the God who loves, even us.

The two commandments connected by Christ connect us to God and to our neighbor. How we choose to respond influences the behavior of others, the planet upon which we live; and all the animals – for good or for ill. They challenge and invite us to rethink how we are planning to respond to our stewardship of our time and of our talents shared, and this year more than others before, how we will respond through our tithing.

The newly adopted long range plan will not happen only through our joyful hearts. It cannot happen without our financial commitment, giving beyond what we accomplished last year. It cannot happen without those to whom much has been given, giving a little more for those for whom life has been extra challenging – those whose work has been cut back or eliminated completely. We are here to help each other. We are here to make the love of God just a little more visible.

God's love is made crystal clear when we extend mercy, grace, generosity, justice and joy. Such a love as this is not a

feeling - it is a choice – a choice to co-create a culture of generosity and community even now, even here, in Columbus, Ohio.

You shall love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind; and your neighbor as yourself. May we choose wisely, in the name of our risen Savior. Amen.

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