

October 25, 2020
30th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Matthew 22: 34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them (a scholar of the law) tested him by asking, "Teacher, 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."

Background:

Last week's gospel reading recounted Jesus dealing with the potentially embarrassing questions of the scribes and the Herodians. This week, a lawyer who is one of the Pharisees approaches Jesus with another question. Between this Sunday's gospel and the gospel from last week, Matthew recounts the Sadducees approaching Jesus with their question and attempt to discredit Jesus. The Sadducees did not believe in life after death, so they proposed a situation where a woman was taken as a wife by seven brothers in turn, in order to conceive an heir for the family. The woman and all seven brothers die childless. Their question is, "Whose wife will the woman be in the next life?" (Matthew 22:23-33). All these questions are meant to embarrass and discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people.

While Jesus is being challenged by Jewish leaders of his day, do not be too quick to judge these leaders unfairly in their attacks. Remember that in Matthew's gospel it is Jesus himself who started the confrontation with the parables he told. In the parable of the two sons, (Matthew 21:28-32) the Jewish leaders are represented by the first son who said he would go to work in the vineyard but did not. In the parable about the landowner and the servants, (Matthew 21:33-46) they are presented as the servants who reject the message, who beat those sent by the landowner to collect his share of the harvest, and who kill his son hoping to gain control of the property. In the parable about the king's feast, (Matthew 22:1-14) they are the invited guests who refused to attend the wedding banquet.

The question that is put to Jesus in this gospel text is not new. The Law included 613 commandments, 365 prohibitions (one for each day of the year), and 268 prescriptions (one for each bone in the human body). Each was considered binding because they were given by God to Moses. It would be unrealistic to expect a person to remember them all. Therefore, it was common to either condense the commandments into a number of summary statements, or to identify the more important commandments. King David has suggested eleven (Psalm 15), the great prophet Isaiah proposed six (Isaiah 33:15), the prophet Micah had three (Micah 6:8), and Amos reduced them all to a single one (Amos 5:4).

Others dealt with the 613 commandments by classifying some as heavy commandments and others as light. "Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord, your God, has commanded you, that you may have a long life and prosperity in the land which the Lord, your God, has given you." (Deuteronomy 5:16) was considered a heavy commandment. "If, while walking along, you chance upon a bird's nest with young birds or eggs in it, in any tree or on the ground, and the

mother bird is sitting on them, you shall let her go, although you may take her brood away” (Deuteronomy 22:6) was considered a light commandment. The way that Matthew presents the lawyer’s question in the gospel makes it clear that it is part of the effort to discredit Jesus, but the question itself is based in a long tradition of making livable one’s relationship with God, and it was at least in part based in observance of the 613 commandments.

Jesus’ response to the lawyer’s questions is not original. The two commandments that Jesus draws on for his response are found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. The linking of the two commandments can be found in at least one earlier Jewish work. Perhaps what is most radical about Jesus’ response is not apparent until one reflects about Jesus’ ministry and other teachings. It has to do with who Jesus understood to be one’s neighbor. The people that Jesus was addressing would have considered their neighbor to be their family, extended family, neighbors, and fellow Jews. The command to love was a command to be in a relationship that was characterized by loyalty, respect, and care for their welfare. Love described a code of behavior, not an emotional attachment. As Jesus’ ministry unfolds, it is clear that Jesus treats many as his neighbor who would have been considered outsiders by the people of the day.

Reflection Questions:

1. When you consider all the people you come in contact with, and those on whom your daily living depends, to what extent does your relationship with them contain a level of loyalty?
2. In your personal experience, how common is the effort to build up the reputation of another? How common is the effort to detract from the reputation of another?
3. Is question #2 harder to answer because it is an election year? What does that say to you?
4. If you looked to how Jesus lived his life for examples of how to love your neighbor, what incidents in the gospel would come to mind?
5. If you look again at Jesus’ life for examples of how he loved God with his whole heart, soul, and mind, what comes to mind?
6. Lastly, if you looked at Jesus for examples of how to love yourself, what would come to mind?
7. What stands out for you as you hear Jesus’ summary of the commandments? Where do you feel challenged? Where do you feel encouraged?
8. Can you take some time to talk to God about your desire to love God, your desire to love your neighbor, or your effort to love yourself? Or you might talk with God about your desire to bring these two commandments together in the way you live your daily life?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for October 25, 2020, the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thus says the Lord: "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans.

"If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner toward him by demanding interest from him. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body. What else has he to sleep in? If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate."

I love you, O Lord, my strength, O Lord, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.
my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold! Praised be the Lord, I exclaim,
and I am safe from my enemies. The Lord lives and blessed be my rock! Extolled be God my savior.
You who gave great victories to your king and showed kindness to your anointed.

Brothers and sisters: You know what sort of people we were among you for your sake.
And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the word in great affliction,
with joy from the Holy Spirit, so you became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.
For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth not only in Macedonia and in Achaia,
but in every place your faith in God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.
For they themselves openly declare about us what sort of reception we had among you,
how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to await his Son from heaven,
whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath.

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees,
they gathered together, and one of them, a scholar of the law tested him by asking,
"Teacher, 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.
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yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

Excerpts from Exodus 22:20-26; Psalm 18:2-4, 47, 51; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10; and Matthew 22:34-40