

Deuteronomy 34: 1 - 12
Psalms 90: 1 - 6, 13 - 17
Year A, 24th Sunday after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 2: 1 - 8
Matthew 22: 34 - 46
October 26, 2008

Can You Command Love?

Can you command love? Grammatically, the question is really, “Can you command or order someone to love?” Jesus certainly is saying much more than this in his response in our gospel but the thought keeps bouncing around in my brain. Can you command or order someone to love? I need to think on this idea for a while.

For faithful Christians, the creeds, whether the Apostles or the Nicene, are our great statement of faith. We recite them every week on Sunday and are encouraged to say them in the context of the Daily Office every day. Our great confession of faith is long and detailed and works to answer a myriad of early church heresies. They work to inform us of the basics of our faith, the most essential elements and themes. In our modern society where everything must be questioned, the Creeds have come under attack for not being comprehensive enough. They speak of Christ as God. They speak of the Holy Spirit. They talk about the Incarnation and Mary. They even speak of Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection. The criticism that is leveled at our ancient composite of belief is that everything between Christmas and Holy Week is omitted. The Creeds ignore all of Christ’s teachings and parables and miracles. Until I had read some of those critiques I had never considered this gap in what many hold to be a comprehensive declaration of faith. The Creeds cover all of the big stuff but leave out the details of a holy life. As a result, the teachings of Christ are theoretically left out of our faith system. Of course, we still believe them, but the Creeds make no reference.

This essential problem of finding a comprehensive statement of the faith was a deep and abiding concern of Judaism. There are an incredible 613 laws to follow in the Torah- 613 rules and regulations to which all those who would follow the God of Israel must adhere. In Judaism, the Law or the Teaching is not a terrible and oppressive thing. God has gifted His chosen people with the Torah to help them properly order and appreciate this life. 613 rules sound like a lot unless they are considered gifts from a loving and holy Creator. Then, instead of burden, the Law becomes a means of guidance and hope. However, finding a way to reach the heart of these rules was deemed virtually impossible. On the one hand, you had to cover the rules or sacrifice and worship to God. On the other hand, you needed to encompass the law governing relationships between people. There were summations of each area but nothing that reached all 613 rules. One of the most famous Rabbi's in history, Hillel, was asked how to neatly codify the law. His response is the inverse of the golden rule, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary."

While Hillel's answer is brief, the question was not settled. For the past several weeks we have listened again and again to the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Saducees attempt to trick and trap and undermine the authority of Jesus. They have been working from every angle imaginable to prove Christ unworthy. In today's gospel we find the only mention of a lawyer in the entirety of Matthew's work. The attorney comes to ask the deep and abiding concern of faith for Judaism, "What is the greatest commandment?"

My dad's family has always had some very different traditions. My great grandfather, William Seldon Murray I, was an inventor who was

constantly trying to make things work in new and different ways. He was often trying to produce labor-saving devices. I am not sure if he ever managed to get too many of them to work, but he was tinkering constantly. This desire to put things together in new and different ways bled over into all areas. My great-grandfather went by the nickname Bud. His wife's name was Rose. When they had a daughter, they put their names together as well and named her Rosebud. My grandfather married a woman named Corinne. So, when they started selling items from their farm, he took the first three letters of his middle name and his wife's first name and called it Corsel Farms. He bought a dog and named it after his first three grandchildren, Craig, Elizabeth and Billy which became Crelby. In each instance, the sources were already known, they just put thing together in a different way which led to something new.

Jesus is doing the same thing. The first and great commandment is called the Shema and can be found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Faithful Jews pray this verse each morning when they wake and each evening when they go to bed, "Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Love the Lord your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all you might." Think for a just a moment about the power of saying this basic, holy prayer twice a day, every day, and focusing yourself intently and eternally on fulfilling this commandment. This verse is known and repeated by every faithful Jew. Jesus is NOT teaching something new with this first quotation. For that matter, Jesus is NOT teaching anything new with the second verse. Quoting from Numbers 19:18, "love your neighbor as yourself." The sources are known and appreciated by any faithful Jew of the era. However, putting the two together creates something that is new and different. And Jesus is merging the two separate commandments into one. We hear in

English, the phrases “first and great commandment” and “the second is like unto it” but Jesus is linking them into one with the second phrase. The translation is literally correct but the intention comes closer to “this second phrase has the same meaning”. Jesus is combining two previously separate commands into a great proclamation of love¹: Love the Lord your God with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your might and your neighbor as yourself. There is no daylight between the two ideas. Faith and ethics forever bound in the context of love.

Which brings me back to that first elemental question: Can you command love? Can Jesus truly believe that we can be ordered, commanded to love God and others? Can we be expected to truly love God with heart, soul, and might because we are told to? Christian and Jewish scholars have struggled with the Shema. They have carefully broken down each of those three portions of the command.² Loving God with all your heart refers to “an undivided loyalty, both good and evil impulses.” Loving God with all your soul/life refers to “a commitment even to the point of death or martyrdom”. Finally, loving God with all your might refers to something completely different than strength, instead our “substance, wealth, property given in the service of God.” In this season of Stewardship, proclaiming that we love God with ALL our might is a declaration that everything we have can and will be used for God’s service and glory. This three-fold commandment covers our minds, our bodies and even all that we have. In linking this all-encompassing command to love with our neighbors, Jesus is drawing the correlation that our love for God is most clearly expressed in

¹ There is some debate about whether or not Christ is the first to link these commandments, but the response of the lawyer and Pharisees implies that they had not heard it previously.

² This summation is taken from Miller, Patrick *Deuteronomy: Interpretation*. (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1990) p. 102.

caring for all of those around us in concrete, daily and regular fashion. We are not talking about a commandment to romantic love but a command to work daily to find God in those around us. Fulfilling the Shema is not about an esoteric, abstract theory but working through every single action of every single day to find God everywhere, in the most simple of gestures to the very paychecks we receive. We can do this not because it is commanded but because we are responding to love. God gave 613 instructions to help us on our way. God led bishops to craft creeds for unite theology and history. God gave Jesus in pure and utter love as a way to understand God. We are invited into God's love affair with humanity by loving those around us and those far away. Can you command love? Yes, but only when you have loved first and opened the way to love- a love that gives us 613 commandments, that gives us three creeds, that gives us a Savior and example, and that gives us everything we have in the first place, our heart, our souls and our might. Loving God back is the only possible answer to such gift and invitation.

Amen.