



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Cabinet

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 29th, 2017
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 22:34-46

This chapter in Matthew's Gospel records a relentless sequence of questions from Jesus' enemies. They asked him politicized questions like, should occupied Jews pay taxes to Caesar? And no-win questions like, if a person has been married seven times, who will be their spouse in heaven? They were goading and luring him to say something akin to a career-killing tweet or a compromising tapped call. But in an oral culture like theirs, you didn't need a camera or a recording device. The underlying dread of these large gatherings is that all Jesus would have to do is to misspeak once in a crowd, and that would spark a fire that would seal his doom. This has been the case during his entire unlikely ministry. He's on the high-wire above every crowd to which he speaks. And these religio-political parties, the Sadducees and the Herodians and the Pharisees, they say, "Oh, you think you're good, do you? Try catching this!" And they throw him a bowling ball. Or a wild cat. And they all watch to see if he can juggle them both at the same time. His questioners are cheering silently for him to fall to his death, and his disciples are praying with anxious eyes that he survives to preach another day.

The bowling ball that the Pharisees throw at him in today's gospel lesson doesn't seem that bad. "Teacher, which commandment is the greatest?" It may seem like a softball question. Yet in a world where every law and rule of their faith tradition was zealously guarded, and sometimes imposed, to pick one as the greatest could suggest that all the others of God's laws in the Torah are less than great. And this suggestion could turn certain sorts of faithful Jews against Jesus.

So, the brilliant thing is that he doesn't answer the question just as they'd like. He names two top teachings in the Torah. The first is the Shema, an ongoing piece of Jewish and Christian worship to this day. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Deuteronomy 6:4). And the second is "like unto it." The second commandment is just as great. And this is from the Leviticus reading this morning: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This isn't what the Pharisees wanted to hear at all. They wanted a way to force Jesus to show favoritism, which could then be used against him, to knock him off that high wire. Instead, Jesus elegantly and masterfully summarizes the Scriptures in a way that anybody could understand, and he did it under duress, no less!

These teachings are nothing new to his interrogators or to his people. They are from the heart of the Torah. What is new is to put these old teachings at the exact same level: Love of God and love of the person next to you. These are "like unto" each other. They both share the highest summit somehow.

It is simple to say, but it takes a knack to understand. I can see many people being frustrated by Jesus' answer. And not because he didn't answer the question, but because they were confused. How can two commandments be the greatest? How can two things be the greatest? Love of God and love of neighbor. Just

give me one, Jesus, and then I can rest easy.

If we are going to hear what Jesus has to say, we are going to have to give up a certain kind of viewpoint. We are going to have to mature in our spiritual imagination, where we transcend so much of what separates people and ideas, where we transcend all these judgements that have us and our ideas competing for prominence. It is a kind of awareness that doesn't have a center. The technical term is non-dualistic. It doesn't have a spot for the "greatest" person, or even the greatest value. We share this space. We are set in a unified world, where we can't separate things and people from one another. Where you can't separate loving God from loving another person. Where you can't separate heaven from earth.

A question that helps me in my spiritual imagination is to ask, "Which is better? Breathing in, or breathing out?" And after sitting with this a bit, one discovers that there is no answer to this question. The very question exposes how our language works against us. We can deceive ourselves into believing that there are two things (breathing in and out) when they are really the same thing. A process. A flow that seems to move in two directions, but really moves in just one: the giving of life to the body.

A similar kind of unified flow is what Jesus is inviting us all to join. Love God, love neighbor. Another way to say it is, pray, then act. Look to God and look to one another. Pray, then act. Listen to God and listen to one another. Pray, then act. Act, then pray. Like breathing, it is a complete process, but unlike breathing, this process can give life to the world.

But I find I have to remind myself that this is real and true. If I'm not careful and mindful, a spiritual amnesia will envelop me like a fog, and I won't be able to truly see the presence of God that surrounds me at every turn. I find that I have to be in places like this, where focus on the beauty and wonder of all this can emerge again.

If you would be so kind, I'd like to invite you to close your eyes. This won't take very long. And feel free to open them if you need to, for any reason. But if you wish, please close your eyes and imagine something. Just imagine that God is right before you. There are all kinds of ways that you can imagine God, but I want you to imagine, as best you can, that you are in the same space with God, and God is there before you, in all God's fullness, in your very sight. Now freeze that picture, whatever it is. And imagine, around the center, like a cabinet in a kitchen, two small panels opening out. And you step closer, gingerly, to look inside. And this is what you see. Please open your eyes. You see all this. Look around. All these people. Every person in this room, every person on this earth, is found deep in God's heart. Right there. We are in such a world where, when you direct your love to God, you direct your love to them. And the second facet is like unto it. Everyone, everybody, every soul that shares this time with you, within their cabinet doors—and we all have them—within those two panels, is God's dwelling. And at the center of that dwelling is God, in the flesh, in the Spirit. And so when you love someone, you direct that love to God, also. Within every person is a door that leads to God. And within God in heaven is a door that leads to every person. Do you see how the doors never stop opening? How they connect everything right at the heart, and do you see how they keep going, to infinity and beyond? In all and through all.

In a moment when anything but love was being directed at him, in a moment when his faith was being twisted to destroy him, Jesus was able to tell them and us to hang all the law and the prophets, the whole kit and caboodle of our faith, to support all of it upon a vision of love that is as broad and deep as the vision we just shared. Imagine what it would be like if we could not only see this vision from time to time, but actually live our lives with this vision as our guiding light. What would it be like if we could know this in our bones as we encounter all of the people that we meet in the time we have been given? If we can hang it all on the faith that at the heart of everyone is a door to God, and at the heart of God is a door to everyone that we ever meet? If we can hang our entire lives on that sublime, unfathomable loop, well, then, it will be ever more difficult to discern where earth stops and heaven begins, precisely what Jesus came to begin, and then finish, with us and through us.

And all it takes to join with him, led by this greatest of commandments, is to pick the next door to open. There's the door of prayer. There's the door of action. There are doors in heaven and doors on earth. There are doors in people close to us, and doors in people we have yet to know. All these doors open with our love. There are so very many to choose from! And they never end.

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