

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Deuteronomy 34: 1 – 12  
1 Thessalonians 2: 1 – 8Psalm 90: 1 – 6, 13 – 17  
Matthew 22: 34 – 46

-----

In her book, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, author Kathleen Norris writes about her own spiritual journey. “Even as I exemplified the pain and anger of a feminist looking warily at a religion that has so often used a male savior to keep women in their place,” she writes, “I was drawn to the strong old women in the congregation. Their well-worn Bibles said to me, ‘There is more here than you know,’ and made me take more seriously the religion that had caused my grandmother’s Bible to be so well used that its spine broke. I also began, slowly, to make sense of our gatherings on Sunday morning, recognizing, however dimly, that church is to be participated in...The point is not what one gets out of it, but the worship of God; the service takes place both because of and despite the needs, strengths and frailties of the people present. How else could it be?”

There is more here than you know. Is that possibly Jesus’ real message in his responses to the Pharisees in today’s Gospel? Jesus’ real message in both his answer to the Pharisee’s question about the law and his question back to them which the Pharisees are unable to answer. There is more here than you know.

Today’s Gospel is the last in a series of altercations that Jesus has with the Temple leadership and the powers-that-be. One after another, the chief priests and elders, the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Sadducees have been trying to trip Jesus up so they can bring charges against him. Jesus has just finished silencing the Sadducees by telling them that they neither know Scripture nor the power of God. Now the Pharisees take one last stab at it. One of them, a scribe, asks Jesus which commandment of the law is greatest.

The scribe is not talking about the Big Ten. Over the centuries, the Hebrew tradition has developed 613 mitsvah, or commandments: 248 positive commands (this equals the number of parts of the body) and 365 negative commands (one for each day of the year). ‘So, Jesus,’ asks the scribe, ‘which one of these 613 mitsvahs is the MOST important?’ It’s not a particularly sincere question. Although it’s not unusual for rabbis to sit around and indulge in interpretation and speculation about this very question, there is a somewhat common reverence for them all being equally binding.

Jesus’ response is in two parts. First, Jesus gives the scribe not one but two commandments. Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, tying them together. In doing so, Jesus is stating a theological position, that loving God looks like loving one’s neighbor and vice versa. In giving the scribe the answer of both, Jesus is saying that one of these is not any more or any less important than the other. He is also saying that they are inseparable. It is, perhaps, Jesus’ way of telling the scribe that ‘there is more here than you know.’

Now, so far, Jesus’ answer doesn’t really raise too many eyebrows. What he has said has been said before by other rabbis. His words represent an orthodox viewpoint on Jewish law. Even though the laws are mostly of equal weight, other rabbis have also raised up both of these. But Jesus doesn’t stop there. It’s almost as if Jesus intentionally provokes the scribe by then asking the question, which sounds more like a riddle: how can David’s Lord also be David’s son? In asking this question, Jesus is letting the scribe and others know that there is also more to the idea of “messiah” than they know. But they don’t get it. The scribe doesn’t have an answer, nor do any of the other Pharisees. They may not know the

answer to Jesus' question, but they do know one thing. They aren't going to ask Jesus any more questions. He's too good at turning the tables on them and making them look like fools in front of the crowd that loves this ping-pong like, back-and-forth between Jesus and the various leaders. And, in truth, there is more there than the Pharisees and others know. The son of David and David's Lord stands in front of them in the person of Jesus, in flesh and blood, but not everyone can see it.

There's more here than you know, Jesus is effectively telling not only the scribes and Pharisees, but anyone who will listen. Loving God and loving neighbor is what it's all about. Jesus concludes his comment about the most important commandment by saying that everything else in the teachings hangs on these two pivotal commands. All else is merely commentary.

The British wit and author, G. K. Chesterton, once said that 'Jesus commanded us to love both our neighbors and our enemies because so often they are the same people.' Every one of us knows how hard it is to put love into action as a verb and to maintain the effort. Loving one's neighbors, which in Luke Jesus defines as anyone in need, is hard work. It involves getting beyond likes and dislikes, hanging in there when we'd really rather not, self-sacrifice and commitment, even when there appears to be nothing in it for us. It involves living into our Baptismal covenant in which we seek to serve the Christ in everyone. No matter how cleverly we may think it is camouflaged. It involves understanding that everyone is a child of God and that when we love our neighbor, we are loving God. This is why Jesus binds these two commandments together so closely.

More and more people seem to be defining themselves as 'spiritual but not religious' these days. And every person who says that probably means something a little bit different by it. The Rev. Delmer L. Chilton writes that, to him, these seem to be folks who are interested in the idea of an amorphous, rather disconnected divinity, and some vague sense of holiness or mystery on a personal basis. But, for the most part, he writes, they don't seem to be too interested in being part of 'organized' religious bodies that are 'communities of people with similar interests because that would require them to take these other people and their opinions and problems seriously.' In other words, Chilton writes, they are 'people who are happy to love the God whom they cannot see, but they do not wish to get too involved with the neighbors whom they *can* see.'

It can be really easy to love God, if our God is simply out there somewhere. We can define the Divine in such ways that God is not connected to the pain and suffering that we witness and/or experience in life, and therefore not responsible for any of it. That way, we don't ever ripple the waters of relationship with God by getting angry with or resenting God. If we don't expect much out of God, then perhaps God won't expect very much from us, either. That kind of God-love is never going to interfere in our messy, daily lives.

However, if loving God and loving neighbor are tightly bound together for us, well, that's a different story. We have to deal with the rest of the world – people who are imperfect and on a journey, just like ourselves. We have to love people who are often not 'deserving' of our love, just as we are often not deserving of their love. We have to love people who may never acknowledge our love, just as we so often forget to acknowledge others' love. We have to love people who may not, in fact, be capable of loving us back. We have to love people who care about us, but whom we may not care about. It's hard.

For those who self-describe as 'spiritual but not religious,' Chilton says that these folks speak more truth than they know. Spiritual is ephemeral, nebulous, wispy. There's not much to hang onto.

But then, it makes it easier to not have to deal with it. On the other hand, Chilton says, the root of the word 'religion' should indicate something to us. It comes from the Latin *ligare*, which is also the French root of ligament, that dense, connective tissue that holds our bones together. *Ligare* means to tie together, to bind, as in the 'ties that bind.' Ligaments tie one bone to another; religion ties us to God and to one another. Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh.

Spiritual-but-not-religious folk may feel that they can be free of such ties and bonds, and go on very happy indeed. But a desire to be religious is an awareness, at some level, that an untethered, amorphous, disconnected divinity is not a God who would dare take on ligaments and bones, and or to dive right into the middle of human suffering. However, the God that we, the Body of Christ, profess is a God of unlimited love who, out of that love, chooses to suffer with us and to get very messy.

As the Church, we spend a lot of time, money and effort on a lot of things – programs, initiatives and ministries; theological and spiritual conversations; building up the church literally and figuratively; and mission work. What we must always remember is that the foundation for all of it is love. Because the basis of our very existence is the totally unmerited, unqualified love of God who first loved each and every one of us. Loving God and loving neighbor – and the corollary of loving self – is never easy. But in doing so, we will come to know that there is far more here than we know. +