

A resource to help you in your preaching ministry.

October 23, 2005
Proper 25, Ordinary 30, Year A
Reading: Matthew 22:34-40

Summary

When Jesus said, "A second is like it," he gave a whole, new declaration of the nature of our relationship to God.

Answer in Duplicate

Some people don't seem able to give short answers. Often, they are individuals who know more about most subjects than people generally want to hear. There was one man who, if you asked him about the job market, would answer with a rather complete summary of Economics 101. One person put it, "I asked Hank about his grandmother's nationality and he took me all the way back to the Garden of Eden."

Jesus usually gave very succinct answers when people came to him with questions, whether the questions came from friends or from foes. But short and pointed as his answers were, he often told his questioners more than they wanted to know.

That's the case in our scripture lesson of the day. In this case, it was the enemies of Jesus who were directing questions to him. Unfortunately, their questions were not for purposes of information or for guidance in life decisions; their only goal was to see if they could somehow trip up Jesus so they could discredit him. Jesus had told a story — a "parable," to use the familiar biblical word — that especially upset some of his listeners, because they felt the parable was directed at them. As a matter of fact, they were right. This made them more anxious than ever to be rid of Jesus. But they needed an excuse.

So they tried a question they thought would get Jesus in trouble with the Roman government, but Jesus handled it so deftly it was almost embarrassing. Then some of them got into a rather complicated religious question about heaven; this was particularly interesting because the question was raised by a sect that didn't believe in heaven. Again, Jesus took care of the question effortlessly, the way an experienced catcher throws the ball back to the pitcher.

That brings us to the part of the story that you heard as our scripture lesson of the day. A lawyer offered a question. Now we're dealing with an expert. Questions are a lawyer's bread and butter. Lawyers are trained to

anticipate issues that don't occur to ordinary mortals, and to put questions in such a way that it's hard to avoid the issue. And of course the lawyers in Jesus' day, in Israel, were by definition theologians, because the law of Israel was the Law of Moses, the teachings of the Torah, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament.

The question was so straightforward, however, that it's hard to tell whether the lawyer was really trying to put Jesus on the spot or whether he was simply taken with Jesus' answers and wanted his opinion on a premier question. It was, as I've said, a very straightforward question, in truth a kind of life-and-death question. "Teacher," the lawyer asked, "which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

The answer, part 1

It seems to me that the lawyer was going beyond the Ten Commandments. He wasn't seeking a judgment on the relative importance of murder, adultery and graven images. It was almost as if the lawyer were saying, "What's the purpose and goal of life? Give me the story in a nutshell." A lawyer was the right one to ask such a question. Lawyers spent the hours of their lives wrestling with issues of the law. I think this man really wanted to get to the heart of the matter. I see him as tired of the minutiae of the law, the nit-picking that simply sought to win cases or to cloud up issues. He wanted to know what the law was all about. Why, really, had God spoken to Moses so long ago, and given this body of law that now had grown into a monster of details?

Jesus' answer was as straightforward as the lawyer's question: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment." I think that if Jesus had stopped there, the lawyer might have said, "I agree with you." But perhaps he would also have whispered to himself, "But I think I knew that before I asked him." Any truly devout person, anyone really seeking a high level of living, would conclude that the beginning point is an all-out, all-consuming love for God, and thus for doing the will of God. And a faithful student of the Hebrew scriptures knew that this was ultimately what their law was all about; that when you got through the thicket of the hundreds of details of their law, here was the heart of the matter: Love God with all your being.

The answer, part 2

But Jesus didn't stop there. Do you remember my saying that although Jesus gave brief, direct answers, they were nevertheless sometimes longer than people wanted? Well, here's the rest: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now here's an interesting thing. The first commandment appears in the Law of Moses in a way that identifies it as "first." When Moses begins his farewell speech to his people, he starts with what we refer to as the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone,"¹ after which he proceeds immediately to the statement about loving God with all our heart, soul and mind. This commandment is located where you would expect the keystone commandment to be.

But the second word Jesus spoke, about loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, appears in a rather obscure place, in Leviticus 19:18. It is one of several dozen commandments in that chapter, along with such matters as not slandering people, and paying proper respect to the elderly. In truth, you could easily miss it. In our English translations, it is only the latter part of a verse. You might almost think it was a throwaway line. But Jesus lifted it out of near-obscure and made it part of the keystone of the Law: Everything in the law and the prophets, Jesus said — that is, everything in the Hebrew scriptures — hangs on these two statements.

And that's not all. See how Jesus put it. After reciting the first statement, and saying, "This is the greatest and first commandment," he continued, "*And a second is like it.*" He didn't say, "This is an addition to the first commandment," or that it is a sub-section. No, this "second" is like the first. That is, it's a kind of *duplicate* — what, in another day, we might have called "a carbon copy."

What in the world does that mean? Well, for one thing that these two commandments are equally significant before God. In a way, that's a bit of a shock. One might easily think that God, being God, might say, "The most important thing is to hold a right attitude toward me, the Lord God of the universe." As a matter of fact, this seems really rather logical. And it is the place to start. Jesus said this is the "first and greatest." But he didn't stop with that. He said that "a second is like it." There's a duplicate here, a commandment that is equally crucial.

The great duplicates

All of which is to say that we can't pick and choose between these two commandments. Some of us might like to center our religion on eternal matters, the wondrous mysteries of God. Some mystics have tried to do that. Some God-seekers in other days have gone out into the desert where there were no humans to get in their way or to give them trouble, and have spent all their energy seeking God. But Jesus as much as said that this doesn't work for most of us. The second commandment, he said, is like the first; they belong together, inseparably. Others of us would like our religion to be all "practical matters." "Don't bother me with all that heavenly stuff," someone says. "All God wants of us is that we're good to our neighbors, that we treat people the way they ought to be treated." Not so, Jesus said. You can't separate these two. The one is just like the other. They are duplicates.

Some people, you see, are so heavenly minded that they're of no earthly use, while others of us are so earthly minded that we have no heavenly connections.

In a way, it all boils down to the way we humans are made. We're created, the Bible says, from the dust of the earth, but the breath of God has been blown into us. As a result, we have to live with a passion for the earth from which we've come and an utter commitment to the God whose breath is in us. To omit either one is to deny what we are: human beings. And to emphasize one above the other is to distort us, to make us not only less than God has created us to be, but to make us strangely misshapen.

I don't know if that first-century lawyer wanted a full answer, an answer in duplicate. Perhaps he would have preferred to keep it simpler, to settle for either one copy or the other. And I know very well that some of us don't want the full answer. Not many of us would say so, in so many words, but we live our lives in ways that indicate that we consider one commandment to be enough, or at least, to be more important.

And Jesus answers, "You can't do it that way. There are two commandments, and the one is 'like' the other." What God hath joined together we dare not put asunder.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4.