

Matthew 22: 34-40 "Journey to Generosity" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/29/16

Ralph Waldo Emerson used to greet old friends with the question, "What has become clear to you since we last met?" It is an intriguing question. I had always assumed that, as I got older or more educated, life would become clearer to me – that I would be able to answer some of the bigger questions of life like if God is good, why does God allow suffering in the world? Truthfully, some things have become clearer such as I tend to be happier when I organize my time, energies, and resources around things that matter the most – my God, my family and friends, my vocation, nature and quiet meditation. I have learned that I cannot possibly please everyone all the time, but I still make the mistake of trying anyway. I have learned that if I don't take care of myself, there is little left to offer to others, but again that is easy to forget. The more I learn, the more I realize how little I know. Through the years, however, I have come to a clearer understanding of Mark Twain's description of the life of riverboat captains as told in his book, Life on the Mississippi. In admiration, Twain writes: "Two things seemed pretty apparent to me. One was that to be a river pilot, a [person] had got to learn more than any one [person] ought to be allowed to know; and the other was, that he must learn it all over again in a different way every 24 hours." With every day of our lives, we find ourselves having to be reminded of important truths that we may have learned before at one time or another, but we keep forgetting. Therefore, we are on a journey of remembering, of relearning, and rediscovering what really matters in life.

What has become clear to you since we last met? I wonder what the Pharisees would answer if asked the same question after their encounter with Jesus? With last week's and this week's text, some scholars have asserted the questioning of Jesus was an attempt at entrapment, meant to humiliate and demean Jesus. The question today is asked by one who

obviously believed he knew the answer already. In Matthew's gospel, unlike the others, the only ones who test Jesus are Satan and the Pharisees. The problem with this is that Matthew's gospel, when taken on its own, clearly becomes a haven for anti-Semitism as backlash for the Pharisees treatment of Jesus. Therefore, I want to clarify by saying that in Mark, the oldest of the gospels and often deemed the source from which Matthew and Luke get parts of their Gospels, the one who asks, "Which commandment is the greatest?" is a sincere believer. It seems that Matthew takes Mark's story and revamps it to reveal to his primarily Jewish audience who can be trusted more, Jesus or the Jewish authorities.

"Which commandment is the greatest?" Jesus is asked. The questioner knows that Hebrew interpretation of Scripture put all the law on equal footing. The details of dietary law were as important as the major themes of charity and forgiveness. To presume to rank the 613 laws according to importance, as Margaret Ann Faeth points out, is to assume the prerogatives of God; it is to dare to speak with the authority of God. So Jesus does while reworking the trap and teaching unequivocal truth in the process. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment." This comes directly from the Jewish prayer called the Shema, a very common prayer which rolls off the tongue as easily for Jews as "Our Father, who art in heaven," rolls off the tongues of Christians. These are prayers that one never forgets. I have made pastoral visits, did one yesterday with Hilda, where someone is unable to speak, unable to focus or process words, but the minute I begin with words Hilda knows so well, "Our Father," her lips began to move in rhythm with mine. People may not recognize their own children, but these words never pass from their consciousness. Such are the words of the Shema, "Hear, O Israel,"

“Listen up, people, listen up and do.” The prayer comes from Deuteronomy 6 and it follows the 10 commandments and a brief speech by Moses that this is the greatest commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. It’s more than just a prayer or a commandment, it is to be a passion in your life. Listen and do, people. Put a reminder in your Google calendar, stick a post-it on the fridge, make it your screen saver. The words “heart, soul, and mind,” was the ancient way of saying, with your complete self, all in, complete and total commitment. God is that Higher Power, borrowing from our AA friends, that helps you break the chains of the past and move forward to freedom and liberation for the future.

After reciting the Shema, Jesus tries to make it clearer concerning how one goes about loving God. This is done by loving one’s neighbors. By neighbor, Matthew means every person, the entire neighbor-world. Loving God and loving humanity are not just similar, they are actually one thing. God is pleased when we love what God loves and any way that we put more love out into the world, we are loving God. As Jesus said, whenever you give even a cup of water to another, you are giving it to me. He didn’t say you have obeyed me, or honored me, but you did it to me. To love humanity is to love God and vice versa for God is a part of every human. Then by adding the phrase, “as yourself,” we are given even more clarity. But only if we realize that in ancient Israel, “love your neighbor as yourself” has a completely different frame of reference than we might expect. It is not what pop psychologists claim, that is, we have to love ourselves before we can love others. Don’t get me wrong - that is certainly good and wise advice, just not what Jesus is inferring. Self is not a reference to you or I or any one individual; self is understood as the household. For you see, in the ancient world, identity was

communal, in contrast to our western notion where the independent self creates its own identity. In communal identity, the person is in a relationship, part and parcel of a household which is the primary social group. Therefore, “loving one’s self” meant relationally loving the whole household, for there was no understanding of individuals outside of the household. People were defined by the relationships they held within the household they were a part of. Members of a household were responsible for caring for each other and for the household itself. So Jesus is directing listeners to love the neighbor-world the same way we love our household; to act for the good of others the same way we might act for the good of our child, sibling, spouse or parent.

This kind of love is a lot more complicated than we sometimes pretend, but it is the kind that Bea at the age of 81 understood quite well. Bea was a very active 81 who spent her days baking treats for teachers, helping with homework for neighborhood kids, calling on the homebound, and always ready to lend a helping hand. Until 2 days before Christmas, when she was walking home from a neighbor’s house after coffee and slipped on a patch of ice. She broke her shoulder. She was in the hospital for 2 weeks including Christmas, but she was not alone. All the neighbors visited and with all the commotion, she couldn’t help but chuckle that at least she didn’t have to clean up before and after them. When she returned home, all her walkways had been scraped clean. A thick, industrial mat was carefully laid between the door and the garage. Inside, she found the Christmas gifts for the foster kids party had been wrapped and delivered in her absence. Throughout the winter, her walkways remained clear, neighbors brought food, and tended to her home. When she tried to pay them, they would laugh and respond they were just being neighborly. They recalled all the times she brought

them meals, babysat their kids, or gave them home-baked treats and modelled for them what it meant to be a neighbor. Jesus would say she modelled what it meant to live in a loving relationship with the household.

It would help on a day like today if Jesus could have simply come up with a nice, clear commandment summarizing all that we are required to give of our money, time, and talents. Instead, with each day on this earth, God prompts us to love and learn, and learn again how to travel that journey to generosity, how to understand what really matters. And with each day, God asks you and I, "What has become clear to you since we last met? How will you live out your love for me and the neighbor-world?" By our generosity, may we do our best today to love and honor our God.