“***Not the Son of David***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Oct. 18, 2020

**Matthew 22:35–46**

A lawyer asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “ ‘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. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

41Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” 43He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,
44 ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet” ’? 45If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” 46No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Do you have some favorite Bible passages, such as “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Ps 23:1)? I know I have favorites. Jesus had at least two favorite Old Testament passages which he holds above all others when he gives the love commandment. Today the love commandment may seem self-evident, but we sometimes forget how radical Jesus’ proclamation here is. It’s a bold statement for that time about what is most important. He avoids a more obvious choice, the Ten Commandments, and goes for two love sayings from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19.

The love saying in Deuteronomy 6 is framed in a way that gives it great importance. Moses tells the people that he is presenting an important teaching that is worthy of being handed on to “your children and your children’s children” (Deut 6:2). Imagine the scene as Moses stands before the Exodus congregation and announces “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (6:4), which is like a trumpet call to get their attention. Then comes the love command, “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children . . . Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead” (6:5–8).

Leviticus 19 isn’t framed in this dramatic way. The whole book is just a list of ritual and moral laws. The middle of chapter 19 has moral laws. Verse 18 says “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Later in the chapter it says “you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (19:34). Jesus picks verse 18 to emphasize. His whole mission has to do with love. He does not come to engage in politics, settle disputes, or advocate for nationalistic hopes. He affirms the best of Old Testament piety and morality, including kindness to the alien.

This is why Jesus takes issue with the nationalistic concept of the Messiah as the son of David, which was the most common Messianic idea. He uses the beliefs of the common people to get them to question one of their assumptions. To understand his reasoning you have to know that, in that culture, no father would ever call his son “Lord.” Fathers were always considered superior to sons. He uses Psalm 110, quoting the line where David apparently calls the Messiah “my Lord” (Matt 22:44; Ps 110:1). Here is Jesus’ reasoning: since no father would call his son “my Lord,” the Messiah cannot be David’s son. Jesus’ audience either has to give up their patriarchal assumption about the superiority of fathers, or they have to give up their nationalistic assumption that the Messiah will be a warring king, a “son of David.” You see how he uses their own assumptions to try to get them to drop their idea of the Messiah as a military or political figure. The Messiah will not be a war leader, but a love leader. This may be even more radical than his exaltation of the two love verses. It crushes the long-held hopes of nationalistic pride. At least indirectly, it implies that the love commandment would apply to Gentiles, as well. The Messiah is greater than David, and everything David stands for. Jesus explains his kingship in a spiritual way: “my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36 NIV).

Jesus wanted to redefine the Messiah idea, but his own apostles did not understand much of his teaching on that topic. Perhaps his action later on of entering into Jerusalem mounted on a donkey provoked more reflection. It was a deliberate fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy of a peace Messiah: a king who is “humble and riding on a donkey,” who will “cut off the chariot from Ephraim” and “shall command peace to the nations” (Zech 9:9–10). Jesus commands peace.

In the early church, there were some speed bumps in the relationships between Jewish and Gentile Christians, but the old idea of a Jewish king who would lead war against the Gentiles was abandoned. Right from the start, the instruction was to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). However, nationalism and imperialism *did* make their reappearance in Christian circles.

What about us? Are *our* religious beliefs today tainted with nationalistic ideas? Would Jesus need to take prophetic actions to try to shake us out of an overly self-interested and narrow interpretation of the Bible? Do we sometimes assume that all our wars are just, or are we willing to fearlessly examine and try to discover our own motives? Would we be able to admit it if we found that we have mixed motives? In our personal lives, are we ready to try to practice love toward people of other nationalities, if we were to meet them?

Becoming a follower of Jesus should mean becoming a brother or sister of all his other followers. There are Christians of all nationalities. There are Arab and Kurdish Christians; in fact, some very brave people. Jesus is the spiritual father of the whole human race. Of course, it’s a very chaotic species, full of misbehaving children, but all are welcome to become a functional part of the family, if they want to be. Jesus rejected the label “son of David” but he applied the label “son of Man” to himself, identifying himself with *all humanity*. He is also the Son of God, and thus, fully human and fully divine. As Paul wrote in Philippians, Jesus did not cling to his divinity, but “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness” (Phil 2:7 combining RSV and NIV).

He came in humility, and he embraced the humble people whom he met. He repudiated the proud and aggressive attitude. He rejected the tendency to look down upon Gentiles, and women, and children. The love command puts an end to the old hierarchies and the old bigotries—or it *should* have put an end to them. The love command calls for a new ethic where everyone is a neighbor, and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. It calls for an end to religious coercion and violence, to any kind of bullying or scapegoating. Jesus is an international Messiah, a peace king, a spiritual parent. We can no longer adhere to a tribal religion with ethnic biases and willingness to use the violent methods of Caesar. We are asked to rethink the whole idea of community, peace, and inclusion. Religious fellowship must be free of coercion. People are drawn to the religious community because of the love that they see there.

Perhaps it is a romantic vision, like the novel that I am reading now, *Precious Bane.* The main character, Prue, is a very spiritual girl who loves God, loves nature, and would love her neighbors, but they are cruel to her. She has a harelip and they are superstitious about that, saying “Here be a wench turns into a hare by night,” and “Her’s a witch.” Her greedy brother drives her hard at the farm work, and the villagers treat her as an outsider, but then a kindly weaver sees her inner beauty and eventually pledges his love to her, helping her to graduate into a new life where she can blossom. One of its messages is to never give up on the hope of love, and always to cherish your love of beauty. That is a romantic message. I think there is a romantic message in the gospel, too. It has hope that humanity, with time, will eventually respond to God’s love.

My point about the gospel is not political, but it *is* cultural, psychological, and spiritual. We need to grow up, and that includes moral growth and social progress in ways that encourage sensitivity and enable peaceful interaction between people of different cultures. Jesus, who ministered to Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans, is our great example and teacher. He came as the World Messiah, and we have an opportunity to start learning more about the wide variety of his spiritual children. Eventually, all of humanity will heed the truth and will become part of his spiritual family. Then, as the prophet promised, “righteousness and praise [shall] spring up before all the nations” (Isa 61:11). Can you imagine? We are trying to build a new world, starting one small community, one peace circle, at a time. Powered by love, you are helping us build *this* peace circle now.