

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost – 25A

Exodus 22:21-27; Psalm 1;
I Thess. 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

October 23, 2005

St. Barnabas Church, Falmouth
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Of late, we have had quite an unusual view into the workings of the judicial mind. First with the nomination and confirmation of Chief Justice John Roberts to the Supreme Court and now with the nomination of the Harriet Miers to fill the Honorable Sandra Day O'Connor's seat and the speculation of her confirmation hearings, our awareness of the legal shades of gray and possibilities of hidden agendas has been heightened. The difference between what a judge or a lawyer has opinioned in the past and what that person's ruling might be while seated on the Supreme Court has been elucidated. And the possibility, of an individual having a moral or political design which could be realized while serving on the court, has been underscored. The balance of power between the three decision-making bodies (the President, the Congress, and the Supreme Court) seems dodgy indeed. Our trust in lawyers, now at the highest levels, feels further eroded. And our skepticism of the judicial system is encouraged. Only the other hand, nothing is new at all!

A lawyer approached Jesus with a trick question in this morning's gospel. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" (Mt. 22:36). According to Jewish tradition, there were at the time 613 distinct commandments and prohibitions. How could Jesus choose one over all the others? However, in the blink of an eye, Jesus knew. As a Jew, he (Yeshua) would have been "marinated" in the cornerstone of Hebrew life and thought. His was an orthodox understanding of Jewish law. Every morning and every evening, one utterance would have passed through his lips – this single line from the "*Shema Yisrael*." Every service he would have attended would have begun with it: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is your God, the Lord alone" and on its heels followed, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Deut. 6:4-5). This is the first and greatest of the commandments – love of God has priority over everything else. The second and equally important commandment, to "love neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) summarizes what the remaining 612 laws were attempting to expound and provide a foundation or context for the observation of all Torah. Jesus was not the first to propose that these texts were the heart of the laws intention; however, his summery has become the basis for our Christian measure of faithfulness. "Love," he said, "is the answer." And the lawyer, uncharacteristically, was speechless.

Jesus moved the trick question from the level of "commandment" or "law" to one of *relationship*. He moved from the "*letter* of the law" to the "*spirit* of the law." He brought *together* our treatment of our neighbor with our relationship with God. It *is* integral, joining the first commandment and the second, since God's love *is* worked out through how we treat others.

The story is told about the business man who proudly announced to mark Twain, "Before I die, I want to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read about the Ten Commandments." Mark Twain observed, "I have a better idea. You could just stay home in Boston and *keep* them." Oh!

The spirit of the law *does* move us from observing just the letter of the law.

It can happen every Sunday we gather together. In worship we encounter love that nourishes and shapes our hearts. We use our imagination and our will to open ourselves to God and neighbor, springing free our hearts, souls, and minds. Words and music, sights and sounds, tastes and movements – all these stimulate our senses, our feelings, and our wits, carrying us beyond them into praise of God. Worship is a venture into community, bringing together old and new neighbors and selves. We show love to others as we would have love shown to ourselves ... and we foretaste eternity.

A story captures this truth: Once upon a time there was a blacksmith who worked hard at his trade. The day came for him to die. An angel was sent to him, and much to the angel's surprise, he refused to go. He pleaded with the angel to make his case before God, that he was the only blacksmith in the area and it was time for his neighbors to begin their planting and sowing. He was needed. So the angel pleaded his case before God. He said that the man didn't want to appear ungrateful, and that he was glad to have a place in the kingdom, but could he put off going for a while. And he was left.

About a year or two later, the angel came back with the same message; the Lord was ready to share the fullness of the kingdom with him. Again the blacksmith had reservations and said: "A neighbor of mine is seriously ill, and it's time for the harvest. A number of us are trying to save his crops so that his family won't become destitute. Please come back later." And off the angel went again.

So it went, year after year, until finally, the blacksmith grew so very old that he decided that it was time; and so he prayed, “God, if you’d like to send your angel again, I’d be glad to come home now.” Immediately, the angel appeared. The blacksmith said, “If you still want to take me home, I am ready to live forever in the kingdom of heaven.” And the angel laughed and looked at the blacksmith in delight and surprise and said, “Where do you think you have been all these years?” He was home.

Jesus fully endorsed *love* as the character of our relationship with our God *and* our *neighbor* ... but he went even *further*. Jesus *lived* love – both to the expected and the unexpected. Embodied in his person, we find Jesus sensed a spirit which superseded the loyalties and prejudices of race, nationality, culture, class, ancestry, family, tribe – and any and all religious and political groupings. With Jesus’ new *application* of the law, *all* outsiders become insiders; *all* enemies and kinspeople become as one.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran pastor, martyred while imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II wrote,

We can love our kith and kin, our fellow countrymen and our friends, whether we are Christians or not, and there is *no* need for Jesus to teach us that. [So] what does it really mean to be a Christian?... *unreserved* love for our enemies, for the unloving and the unloved, for our religious, political and personal adversaries. In every case, [*this* love] was fulfilled in the cross of Christ. (from *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1959)

With Jesus, the whole *basis* for love *shifted*. It was a new revelation, based on the unprejudiced love of God for *all* people. And it was a breath of new life from its very beginning. Julian, who in 332 A.D. became Emperor, once complained:

Why do we not observe that it is the benevolence of the Christians to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done the most to increase [their faith]? It is disgraceful that when no Jew has to beg, and the impious [Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, *all* see that our people lack aid from us.

Could the church, today, be so distinct? Could our lives be so obviously different because of the way that we show love? Could we make a difference by loving those who no one else could imagine us loving?

I believe so. But at the same time, I know that I cannot embody such love all on my own. I have to have been shown love. I have to have received love. I have to have known love.

My parents, my siblings, my wife and my child have shown me what love is. My fellow journeyers in faith (Christians and non) have taught me to love those who are not easy to love. And *you* have shown me love when I was not able to love myself. *I know what it is to love* – because I have experienced it *both* in its giving and in its receiving. Haven’t you, too?

Mother Teresa of Calcutta had a prayer which embodies Jesus’ law of love: “May God break my heart so completely that the whole world falls in. Amen.” *This* is the spirit which encompasses ... this is the summery ... this is the greatest of all.*Amen*.