October 29, 2023 **THE COMPASSIONATE LIFE**

The gospel passage for this Sunday St. Matthew 22:34-46, we read about Matthew's description of an encounter, one of the Pharisees asked Jesus this question, "Which is the greatest commandment in the law,"probably has an ulterior motive for asking it. He is part of the group who asked Jesus that tricky question we talked about last week, the one about whether they should pay taxes to the Roman government. This new question about the greatest commandment is most likely another test, a trap, a trick question designed to get Jesus in trouble. You would think Jesus would be able to see through these folks by now, wouldn’t you?

We may think that Jesus would just ignore the question and the questioner and go on about his business. But he doesn’t. In fact, the response Jesus gives to this question forms the basis of the early Christian community’s understanding of the gospel. All four gospels and the writings of Paul bear unanimous witness to the fact that Jesus’ response to this question defines what is expected of those who would be followers of Jesus.

The question Jesus was asked deals with the Law, the commandments of God by which the children of Israel had been instructed to govern their lives in their promised land. Now, when we hear commandments, we immediately think of the Ten Commandments, which many of us may have asked to memorize at an early age. But the Pharisee who asked Jesus this question, "Which is the greatest commandment in the law?" probably had in mind something a little more challenging than merely choosing one of the original Ten Commandments Moses received from God on Mount Sinai.

By the time Jesus came along, the multitude of commandments listed in the five books of the Torah, the Law, dealing with everything from how to cut your food, to the proper clothing to wear to a funeral, had been counted, numbered, and systemized into 613 commandments. 365 of which were negative imperatives ("thou shalt not...") and 268 positive commands ("thou shalt...").

If we were not already familiar with the answer Jesus gives, we might be hesitant to answer the question, "Which is the greatest commandment?" And rightfully so. After all, what is the most important thing to remember in our relationship with God? But I want you to notice that the text does not indicate that Jesus took even a moment to think about the question before giving his answer. He immediately quoted back to his listeners two of the positive commandments. Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." In other words, you shall love God totally, unconditionally, with all that you are and all that you have.

And the second commandment Jesus selected, even though he was only asked for one, was from Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That is, you shall hold your neighbor in the same regard you have for yourself. Apparently, because Jesus listed these two commands you cannot do one without doing the other. Everything, not only in the Law, but also in life itself, revolves around the commandment, "You shall love..."

These words of Jesus put all 613 little rules and codes and buzzwords of lives and church into perspective. If what Jesus says is right - that above everything else, we are to love God and love our neighbor - then everything else is secondary. It’s great if you can be here every Sunday, and it’s great if you can contribute your money to the church, and it’s great if you volunteer to work in various ministries of the church. But above all else, we are to love God and love our neighbor.

If we were to ask Jesus today, "Which is the greatest commandment?" or "What’s the most important thing in life?" or "What would I have to do in order to pick up my cross and follow you?" I think I know what Jesus would say, don’t you? "With all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might, you shall love the Lord your God and you shall love your neighbor."

How do we answer the question, "What would be expected of me if I were to become a member of Christian Church?" Well, maybe we could just say, "That’s an easy question to answer, but living out the answer is where the hard part comes in. You see, the answer is all you must do is love God totally and unconditionally, with all that you are and all that you have. That’s part one. Part two is you must love your neighbor that way too. If you like to learn more about Christian living, please join us in our worship on Sunday at 11: 00 AM.

Peace!

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