

“Final Exam”
Pentecost 19a Proper 25
Matthew 22:34-46

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The gospel text last week I told you was the first in a series of four conflict stories. Last week the Herodians and disciples of the Pharisees brought a clever question to Jesus to put him to the test. They were amazed by Jesus answer and went away. Next up were the Sadducees. In the political landscape of that day they were the 1 per centers. Their wealth easily surpassed the bottom 90% of the population. They were the priestly, aristocratic party whose interests centered in the temple. The temple was not like the church on the corner. It was a huge affair. It was the economic engine for the city. Unlike the Herodians, who also were a priestly party, the Sadducees opposed Herod and made no alliances with Rome, at least not out in the open. In other words Jesus was getting questions thrown at him from all directions. One commentator refers to these conflict stories as Jesus’ final exam. At the beginning of today’s gospel reading we heard Jesus had silenced the Sadducees. He did more than that. The word used is stronger than that. He muzzled them. He shut them up.

Next up were the Pharisees themselves. Remember how they fit into the political landscape. They were a lay revival movement advocating strict adherence to the law. When the Pharisees heard that Jesus muzzled the Sadducees they put forward their Goliath, a lawyer. This lawyer was an expert in God’s law. Today he would be more along the lines of a seminary Old Testament professor. He asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” There were 613 of them. It would be like asking the baseball commissioner, “Which rule is the greatest?” If he says “three strikes and you’re out,” why not “four balls and you take first base”? Jesus answered with a law very familiar to all of them, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” That comes from Dt. 6:5. Jesus goes

on to quote from that portion of Leviticus that is the first reading this morning, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus continued, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” On these two commandments hang all of Scripture. So all you need is love. That was a Beatles’ song. All you need is love, love, all you need is love. That could have been the Hymn of the Day except it raises such a host of issues I hardly know where to start.

First of all, rather than everything hanging from these two commandments, Jesus words are often used to reduce everything to love. And who is to say what is the loving thing to say or do in any given circumstance? Keep track in TV shows or the movies you watch of how often those upholding Christian virtues are portrayed in a negative way. They are portrayed as critical and self-righteous. The popular media lead us to applaud those who ignore those virtues and in so doing love triumphs as the characters in the story find self-fulfillment and happiness. It is the same situation as the one described at the end of the book of Joshua. Everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes. However, Jesus did not say the commandment to love sets aside the other commandments.

The commandments give content to how it is we love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves. The law, (Torah is the Hebrew word) is about our relationship with God and one another. Created in the image of God how do we live with God and neighbor. As we know, that image is distorted by our willful rebellion. The willful rebellion is summarized succinctly in Genesis as the desire to be like God, to decide for ourselves what is the loving thing to do or say.

It sounds so simple. All you need is love. If it is so simple why don’t we do it? If it is so simple why is it so hard? If it so simple why does a sermon telling me how simple it is make me

feel worse? I know the answer to that. It is because it brings to mind all the times when I have failed.

It is a truism that we will learn to love our neighbor only when we have learned to love ourselves. Jesus doesn't say that. Stanley Hauerwas, in his commentary on Matthew, is brilliant when he says, "[T]o learn to love our neighbor as ourselves requires that we learn to be befriended by God so that we will have selves sufficient for love.

Even so, perhaps even more so with these wise words from Stanley Hauerwas, we are left with a load on our shoulders of what we need to do. Render to God the things that are God's; love God with all our heart, soul and mind; love our neighbor as ourselves; and, learn to be befriended by God. And then Jesus asked a question. Jesus asked the final question in the final exam. Jesus asked a question that ended the final exam with a promise to lift the load from us.

Jesus said, "Now that I have you all here together, let me ask you a question. What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Let me throw in a little reminder. Messiah means anointed one. It is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word Christ. David was anointed king over Israel. All his descendants who sat on the throne in Jerusalem were likewise anointed. They were Messiahs. In Jesus time there had not been a descendant of David on the throne in Jerusalem for six centuries. They hoped for one. God promised one. So when Jesus asked, "Whose son is he?" the answer was obvious, "David's." Jesus then quoted to them one of David's psalms. It is Psalm 110, the Old Testament passage quoted most often in the New Testament. Jesus said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls the messiah Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" We know Jesus is talking about himself. He is both David's descendant and David's Lord. When Jesus is crucified, raised, and

ascended God the Father says to him, “Come and sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”

The promise is all things will be put under Jesus feet, under Jesus’ rule. The promise gets better. The promise gets better because of the method God uses. Our immediate assumption is subjugating all things under Jesus’ feet is going to be done the way it has always been done. Our enemies are subjugated by force of arms, or force of intellect, or force of social class or the force money brings to bear, but force of some kind of other. The victorious king placed his boot heel on the neck of the conquered king who prostrated himself before him. At a parents’ weekend we were asked, “What does a University of Georgia graduate call a graduate of Georgia Tech?” The answer: boss. The place erupted in cheers. You could feel the surge of pride and power and dominance. Remember the images broadcast from Baghdad of those beating the fallen statue of Saddam Hussein with their shoes?

In scripture these expected things, the way the world works, as the world turns, are always turned around. Under God’s kingly rule how is it all things are subjected to Jesus? When Jesus rose from the grave triumphant, I again remind you, he did not seek vengeance. He did not get even with those who put him to death. He rather invited them to follow him on the path from death to life. He showed them mercy. He offered forgiveness, even to Peter. After Jesus’ ascension the inviting was done through those who were already on the path. The disciples got to participate. We disciples get to participate in the subjugation of all things under Christ. We do so by our flailing love for God and neighbor, by our witness to the gospel, by our example, imperfect as it is, of service, mercy, forgiveness, and by making regular use of the means of grace. The means of grace are Word and sacrament. So we regularly put ourselves in hearing range of the Gospel. We need to do that because the gospel runs against the world’s tide. The

world's tide is always threatening to wash us up like so much flotsam on the shoals. We come to the Lord's Supper as the body of Christ for communion with God and the forgiveness of our sins. We make regular use of our baptism when we confess our sins. In confession we die again with Christ. That's why saying, "I'm sorry" is so difficult. But we die with Christ and rise with him in the words of forgiveness. And so we get to participate in bringing all things under Jesus' feet. Jesus will complete that work when he comes again.

Matthew concluded these conflict stories saying, "After Jesus asked his question no one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions." The time is late. There is no more time for conversation. The only thing left for them to do now is to put him to death. And then death, our last and greatest enemy, is the first to be put under Jesus' feet.