

The Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 25, Year A
October 26, 2008
The Rev. Dr. Harry L. Howard

“Asking Good Questions”

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 • Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17 • 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 • Matthew 22:34-46

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the intriguing things about young children, pre-schoolers to be more exact, is their sense of time, or should I say the lack thereof! They live very much in the moment, so they have difficulty conceiving of time in terms of the past and future.

My family and I lived in the Northwestern part of Illinois as I was growing up. Yet our family roots were in Tennessee, so when the opportunity arose, we would drive to Tennessee to visit family. From our home in Scales Mound, Illinois to my maternal grandparents' home in Middle Tennessee was a trip of almost 700 miles. And this was 700 miles on two-lane highways in the 1940s! Two-lane highways that wound through little villages and towns. So it took a very long time to make the trip. Well, before we even got to Galena, Illinois, a mere 11 miles from Scales Mound, I began to ask my one question that would endure for the whole trip: “Are we almost there?” As parents, Nancy and I learned with our own daughter how tiring that question can be!

Well, the question I was asking was understandable and came from the very limited perspective that I had as a three or four year old child. But as I look back on this experience, it illustrates how our questions reflect so much about who and where we are in our lives.

In my first year in seminary, my systematic theology professor preached and preached and preached the importance of asking a good question. For, you see, the question we ask will invariably point us in a certain direction to look for the answer. Our questions are full of assumptions that speak volumes about ourselves.

In today's lesson from Matthew, a Pharisee attempts to try to trip Jesus up with a question, which turns out to be a bad question and which tells us much about the Pharisee: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus comes off much better than I did with my traveling question. He says, first of all, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind". Jesus is here quoting the Shemah, the scripture which was to be recited daily by all Jewish people in Jesus' day. We know it from the book of Deuteronomy: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with

all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4-5). Let’s put it another way: Hear, O, Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. God is One. God is Whole. God is Complete. God is All-encompassing. So unified and unifying is God’s love that He calls for a response in love from the whole person, the whole heart, the whole soul, the whole mind and the whole of our strength. God calls every part of persons to love him.

But wait! Jesus is not done with the Pharisee, nor with us. He goes on to offer us a second yet similar commandment similar to the first one. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," a quote from the book Leviticus (19:18). "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

But can we command another person to love one another? Is that not akin to commanding someone to love Brussels sprouts? In many ways loving our neighbor is not something that comes naturally for us. If you are familiar with D. H. Lawrence’s poem “Love my Neighbor," we get a sense of the dilemma. It goes like this:

I love my neighbor but are these things my neighbors? These two-legged things that walk and talk and eat and cachinnate, and even seem to smile seem to smile, ye gods! Am I told that these things are my neighbors? All I can say then is Nay! nay! nay! nay!

There is a sense of resistance to this commandment from Mr. Lawrence. Love is not our natural inclination. In fact, it's something like a foreign language. We struggle with it, and even then we may not love very well.

My favorite radio personality is Garrison Keillor and his program “A Prairie Home Companion.” He writes the following: I got into the Episcopal Church one summer living in Copenhagen when I suddenly became lonely for English. I had gotten good enough in Danish to say things like `Yes, thank you, I have it well to be the weather and we well shall enjoy to possess the summer here. It is delightful to me for speaking on Danish and find your wife extremely amusing.

Our first attempts at loving are just as awkward and clumsy as are Garrison’s attempt to speak Danish. But it happens. We know it happens. We learn to love because God first loved us. We have a Teacher, just as we can learn a foreign language with the help of a teacher.

God loves us. Sometimes we know this directly. More often we know this because other people, loved by God, show us love. And, in so doing, they show us how to love. So it is that Jesus can command us to love our neighbors. Because he first loved us. He loved "us....to death." "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end..." What greater love can a man or woman have than to lay down their life?

As my cousin put it as we were talking about a difficult uncle we share: "Well, you just got to love `em." These are wise words! And they work with everybody! Sure, they work with your family --wives, husbands, parents, kids. Those are the easy ones, aren't they? You just got to love `em. But these words also work with other people. People you know in church, just for instance. People you work with. People you run with. You just got to love `em.

And there's a lot of spiritual freedom in those words. You don't have to be like them or act like them. You don't have to understand them. You don't even have to like them. They surely don't have to like you.

You just got to love `em. If you've been loved, then you can do that. Just remember how it was when someone loved you.

If you know you are loved, then what else matters? What else matters? "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

AMEN.