

Let Go and Love God!

Rev. David Reynolds

Matthew 22: 34-46

Well, Jesus is back with those nasty old Pharisees. They are of course, the favorite villains in the New Testament. You read the gospels and you get the feeling that they were lurking behind every bush, thought and behavior police, always figuring some way to test or trap Jesus. It's easy not to like them. But, maybe we should try harder to understand them sympathetically. Isn't that the least that it would take to love them as our "neighbors," since that's what Jesus speaks about today? Frankly, I don't think the Pharisees were all that different from us. You know, they didn't try to test Jesus because they were bad, evil people. They weren't part of any first century axis of evil. No, the Pharisees tried to test Jesus because they saw him as a threat to their agenda for the salvation of the Jews! Their agenda was to save Israel! They wanted to save the identity of their people. It was, they feared, being lost as Israel was being overrun by Roman culture. Their religious traditions were being watered down, polluted and lost with the influence of pagan religions and Roman emperor worship. They were being overrun by people who spoke a different language and who had different values and a different culture.

So, they had an agenda, a program for addressing that, for saving their society from undue influence from these others. And their program included a stricter observance of Sabbath laws and purity laws, and sometimes it included encouraging the desire for taking up arms against the Romans. So, you see, as the Pharisees saw it, they needed some popular Galilean rabbi breaking the Sabbath laws and the purity laws, preaching peace and non-violence, and partying with Roman colluders and sinners like they needed a hole in the head! They wanted to save the values and the sanctity of their society, their culture, their religion from the things that threatened them. And Jesus threatened their project.

Many years ago, in one of the first churches I ever pastored, there was a man in the congregation who thought of himself, I'm sure, as a very devout Christian. He attended all kinds of charismatic and fundamentalist gatherings here and there around the state. He had read his bible probably more than anyone in the congregation, and he was out to protect what he thought it said, and the world he thought it proclaimed, from anything or anyone who didn't see it his way. As it turned out, that included me. A couple of weeks after moving there, he had me over for dinner one night and in his living room there hung a painting done by his grandfather of a Ku Klux Klan rally. I'm not making this up.

And to take just one incident, he met me at the door one Sunday after worship, and I don't know where this came from right then, except that perhaps Jesus was hounding him, because I hadn't said anything in my sermon remotely related to what he brought up. But, he met me at the door and he said, "I don't see why I should give my money to help feed a communist. I'll feed him with bullets." But, you see, those were things he saw as threats to the way he thought God intended the world to be. So, he thought it was his job as an American, and perhaps even as a Christian to protect against and to save the world from those threats.

You see, just like the Pharisees in the New Testament, sometimes Jesus becomes a threat to our "salvation" agendas...to things we think are of utmost importance. So, there are those who think that torture should be used on captured terrorists, as a matter of protection, as a matter of saving our society. But, there are those bumper stickers that remind us of just who *our* Lord is, aren't there? The ones that ask, "Who would Jesus torture?" And there are real or imagined threats that some see regarding our culture being overrun by too many latino immigrants, and our schools being compromised by having to spend too much of our resources on teaching English, or teaching in Spanish. And yet, Jesus comes reaching out to and including all the outsiders, enemies, aliens, whoever.

And it's not that any of us are trying to be evil. We're trying to act in what we think is the best interest of our society! How *are* we to have peace and harmony and prosperity in our society? There are real threats, aren't there Jesus? See, if we're honest, and hear our scriptures honestly, we have to confess we are not too different from the Pharisees. We have to confess that Jesus sometimes starts to look like a threat to our agendas for our lives and the life of our society. Listen to what Jesus says to the Pharisees. Essentially it's this: let go and love God. Let go of all your "protection" and "salvation" agendas, and love God! You see, that first verse he quotes from Deuteronomy as the greatest commandment is one the Pharisees knew well.

Remembering just who God really is, and then really doing it is the thing. See, that full verse goes like this: "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might." Apparently, Jesus had recognized that there was some confusion, some forgetting of just who God is, who *alone* is God, who *alone* is to be loved with all your heart, soul and mind. And that's why he adds a second commandment to be linked with that one, even though they'd only asked for one. It's to remember who God is! It's to remember that it is impossible to love this God without loving your neighbor, whoever they are, sinner, stranger, alien, without loving your enemy, even... without loving yourself even at your very worst, even when you are no better than your enemy.

Because that's who God is! Because that's how God loves you, and how God loves each and every one! And that's why Jesus tacks on this final riddle he asks the Pharisees about the Messiah. It's because he knew they had gotten confused by all their noble agendas, and so couldn't see, couldn't imagine what the Messiah of this God might look like. They kept holding onto their ideas of a mighty "Son of David", a royal, conquering Messiah that backed up all their agendas for protecting and saving their society. And he knew they needed to let that go! They needed to let go of their agendas, no matter how threatened they might feel in doing so, and love God.

It was St. Gregory of Nyssa who said, "Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything." Friends, isn't it wonder that ushers in the kind of love to which Jesus calls us? An outpouring in action, in commitment and hard work for the other's well being that loves this God above all our other agendas? An outpouring in action and compassion for neighbor and alien, for Christian and Muslim, for friend and enemy alike? Isn't it wonder at a God who has created this earth that sustains us all in body and in soul? Isn't it wonder at a God who claims us and redeems us again and again, even at our very worst, even in the midst of and from the things that cause us the most pain and regret? Isn't it wonder at a God who in spite of ourselves would continue to raise us all up to new life together on this earth? Isn't it wonder at a God who continues out of love to show us time and time again how we could have been so wrong about how we thought about certain people or groups of people, or certain nationalities or races, and how we treated them? Isn't it the wonder of life as grace?

How are we to truly find peace and harmony and prosperity? We've been taught the answer to that question by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as we've heard it again in this scripture today. It is in letting go and *loving* the God we've known in Jesus Christ, above all else. "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." "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."

Amen.