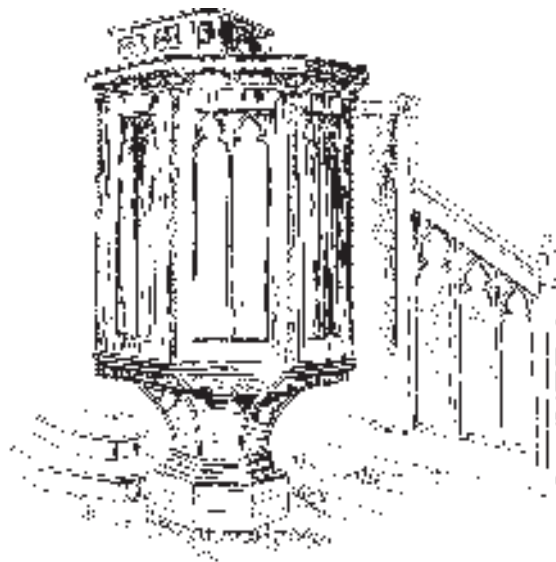


August 30, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

The Intensive Care Waiting Room by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 22:34-39

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

The Pharisees are trying to embarrass Jesus. They send in a lawyer to ask an unanswerable question. Actually the "lawyer" mentioned here (Matt. 22:35) is less like a modern attorney and more like a Bible professor, an expert in the law of Moses. The question this lawyer asks Jesus seems quite benign to us—"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" (Matt.22:36) –but the question is not innocent at all. Matthew tells us that it was a "test," using a variant of the same Greek word translated "tempt" in the story of Jesus' temptations (Matt. 4:1-11). This time Jesus is not being tempted by the devil, but by a Pharisaical theology professor.

What is so sinister about the lawyer's question? Jewish scholars who counted the laws of Moses came up with 613 separate commandments. The lawyer is asking Jesus to pick one out of this number as "the greatest," thereby exposing him to criticism over the 612 commandments he did not choose. The lawyer is licking his chops over the prospect of embarrassing Jesus with a follow-up question, just like reporters do at presidential press conferences. But Jesus leaves no room for a follow up. His answer shows that the lawyer, like the tempter in the wilderness, is no match for Jesus.

The first part of Jesus' response quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: "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" (Matt. 22:37-38). This verse would have been well known to all his hearers, since it formed part of the Shema, a key element in Jewish worship. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one and you shall love...." Devout Jews would have recited this verse several times a day and would have known it by heart. Then Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18 as a second commandment, which is like the first, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:39-40).

Jesus accomplished two things by his answer. First, he showed himself to be completely orthodox. He gave a response that was straight from the treasury of Jewish devotion and, in essence, beyond debate. Who could challenge the idea of loving God with heart, soul, and mind accompanied by the love of one's neighbor as the core of the law?

I am reminded of the theologian Karl Barth's often-quoted response to the question: "What is the most important truth you have learned in your theological study?" The great theologian is reported to have answered, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Who can argue with that? Even the smallest child would recognize and praise the integrity of that answer.

But Jesus does more than establish his orthodox credentials. He also confounds the lawyer – and all like him. The lawyer's question implies a rule-based understanding of the law. "We have 613 rules here; now, which is the most important?" the lawyer was asking. If the lawyer had been asking about baseball, and Jesus had replied that 'three strikes and you're out' was the most important rule, the lawyer would have had reason to produce a counter argument.

"How come the most important rule isn't 'four balls and you walk'?" he might have reasonably said. What Jesus' answer achieves, however, is to undermine the whole notion of the law as rules and regulations. What Jesus claims is that the whole law is about love, not rules; about really loving God and one's neighbor, not about figuring out how to avoid stepping on cracks in the legal sidewalk.

This understanding of the law as love is the reason Jesus can reach out in the name of God and with healing in his hands touch a neighbor who is a leper, even though some would have said that doing so broke one of the rules. The whole law, said Jesus, every one of those 613 commandments, is really about love – loving God and loving neighbor. The scholars of the law had a picture in their minds of every law hanging by a strand to a peg, to some key passage of scripture. Jesus refreshes that image by portraying the whole law and the prophets, everything, as hanging by a cord to the twin pegs of love of God and love of neighbor (Matt.22:40).

Friends, true Christianity puts love over law. Jesus did not establish a doctrinal system or make doctrinal demands. The relatively small number of verses attributed to him (mostly by John) in which he does say things that can be read as creedal statements, or in which he speaks of divine judgment and punishment, are philosophically and tonally at odds with everything else that he says and does. Most of the doctrines that are widely seen as essential to Christian belief were never mentioned by Jesus. At no point in the Gospels, for instance, does he describe himself as having been born of a virgin. At no point, moreover, does Jesus ever hint at the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Yet these two doctrines – the virgin birth and substitutionary atonement – are key tenets for virtually all legalistic Christians; not to accept the veracity of both is, in their eyes, not to be a real Christian at all, and thus not to be truly saved.

Love, not law; relationship, not doctrine. This, at its heart, is what Christianity is about – or should be about, if we are to take its Founder seriously.

There is a place here in Dayton where I have seen such love of God and neighbor. It wasn't a church. It wasn't a park or a business. It was the intensive care waiting room. Those small waiting rooms of no more than a dozen people—just outside the locked intensive care unit.

In *One Inch from the Fence*, Wes Seeliger writes: "I have spent long hours in the intensive care waiting room...watching with anguished people...listening to urgent questions: 'Will my husband make it?' 'Will my child walk again?' 'How do you live without your companion of thirty years?'"

Have you ever taken a seat in the intensive care waiting room? I have. The intensive care waiting room is different from any other place in the world, and the people who wait there are different too. They can't do enough for each other. No one is rude. The distinctions of race and class melt away. A person is a father first, a black man second. The garbage man loves his wife as much as the university professor loves his, and everyone understands this. Each person pulls for everyone else and prays for everyone else.

In the intensive care waiting room, the world changes. Vanity and pretense vanish. The universe is focused on the doctor's next report. If only it would show improvement. Everyone knows that loving someone else is what life is all about.

I wonder... Could we learn to love like that if we realized that every day of life is a day in the waiting room?