

Those Challenging Questions

[Text -Matthew 22:34-40]

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This past Tuesday and Thursday, we held a Confirmation Class “mini-retreat” here at the church. It was a rather rare opportunity for me to have some extended quality time with all four students at the same time! So to make the most of this, I wanted to use our time concentrating on things that are central to our Faith, *and* things that might actually matter to these students. Fortunately, there’s an interesting intersection between these two areas. Tuesday morning, we all began by writing-down three questions about Life, or Faith, that we’d like to address in our time together. And while these questions varied in detail, they all basically boiled-down to these two: What parts of the Bible can we truly believe? And, Why doesn’t God do something about all the pain and suffering in this world? [I should mention that these are four very bright students!]

In today’s New Testament reading, the Pharisees send one of their brightest teachers of religious law to entrap Jesus in what they hope is an impossible question: “Which commandment in the Law [among the hundreds] is the greatest?” They figure whichever one Jesus chooses, he’s going to alienate a lot of people who won’t like that choice. However, rather than simply picking one commandment from Moses’ Top Ten List, Jesus takes one from the Book of Deuteronomy, and merges it with another found in Leviticus. And rather than choosing one of the myriad of “Thou shall *not*” commands, Jesus picks two commandments that can inspire people to realize what they *can* do. Then he rightly concludes, that *all* of the Hebrew Law and all the teachings of the ancient Prophets depend upon these two commandments .

The point is, that the core of our Faith, isn’t a long list of religious “do’s” and [mostly] “don’ts”. It’s a positive, uplifting message of Divine love for all people. And it’s important that we recognize that the real value of the Bible isn’t to tell us what we must or must not do. It’s to

reveal what God has already done, and *continues* to do, to enhance, inspire, and raise-up our lives. The message of Jesus Christ is a Divine *proclamation* of Good News! Yet the authenticity of this message is reflected most fully by what people do, rather than by what they say.

Every time Jesus' detractors try to trip him up with words, he basically cuts right through all that verbiage and goes directly to the heart of the matter. In doing so, he often transforms or even dismisses many of the ancient Hebrew teachings; particularly when he sees those teachings being used to oppress, judge, or hinder people's lives. Jesus understands that the purpose of faith is to help us live lives that are full and meaningful, joyful and peaceful, kind and fair. This is why he proclaims that the greatest commandment - to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind - *must* be merged with that second one - to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. After all, how can we possibly love a God who we have never seen, if we don't love our sisters and brothers with whom we interact every day? According to Jesus, we can't.

First John Chapter 4:19 says, "We love, *because* God first loved us." This declaration of motivation indicates that genuine love can't be "commanded"; nor can it be induced by fear or threats. However, when you and I begin to comprehend and experience the profound depth of Divine Love, we will *want* to do what is good and right and loving - in grateful response to God's initial and on-going graciousness.

Loving God with all our heart and soul, means that we will keep God at the heart and center of all that we say and do. And loving God with all our *mind* means that you and I not only have the freedom, but also the responsibility, to think critically about the Wonderful Divine Reality and Sacred Mystery. It means that we can read the Scriptures with a completely open mind, while embracing all the marvelous insights of science, philosophy, psychology, history - and even fictional literature! [This week, I learned that Harry Potter has a lot to say about the classic struggle between good and evil, *and* the redemptive power of

forgiveness and love!] For Christians, loving God with our mind means looking at all the *written* Words of Scripture through the compassionate mind-set of Jesus Christ, the *Living* Word. The One whose own words and example encourage us to not get bogged-down with words; but rather to pay close attention to our actions - and our interactions - with all those people we encounter every day. Or as Jesus so succinctly puts it: To love our neighbor, as we love ourselves.

I believe this may help answer that difficult question, “Why doesn’t God do something about all the pain and suffering in this world?” Apparently God does - by inspiring and empowering people to carry-forward the marvelous ministry of Jesus Christ: To feed the hungry, heal the sick, lift-up the oppressed, and proclaim the Good News of God’s inclusive and everlasting love. For me personally, worshiping and learning and growing and connecting with this Family of Faith, helps provide the hope and power that I need, to try to make a positive difference in this often troubled and hurting world. And even when the task seems overwhelming, for an aging and run-down Reverend, I don’t give-up! Because I know *four* - and *many more* - young people who can step-up and carry this ministry of love faithfully forward.

No question about it!