

Matthew 22:34-46 Pastor Bill Uetricht 10/29/11 19 Pentecost

I know last week I made it quite clear that life lived in light of the God of the Bible is life lived outside of the boxes that we would like to create for ourselves and for God. God and life, I argued, are too complex for the boxes. Life is not either/or, but both/and. God busts out of our boxes, I said last week. Life begs from us a complex, nuanced reading of all that it throws at us. Good/evil, church/state, us/them, religion/politics, my money/God's portion—we can't box them and remain faithful to the God who constantly surprises us and confounds us.

Now, I am not going to suggest that you forget always and forever everything that I said last week, but just for the sake of this sermon this week, forget what I said last week. Life last week was complex, confounding, surprising. This week life really is quite simple. This week we are confronted with simplicity. This week it is all very simple.

Oh, it is not the plot is any less complex. But admittedly, the plot has become somewhat predictable. Once again the Pharisees are conniving as to how they can trap Jesus. They've been doing this for weeks. They've been offended by his chutzpah, wondering who he thinks he is, trying to come up with questions that will back him in a corner, causing him to look bad to the Romans and to his own people. Today, they pull out their big gun, a lawyer—an expert in the law—who thinks he may have a way to get Jesus to incriminate himself.

“Jesus, which commandment in the law is the greatest? Answer that one, if you will! And, oh by the way, Jesus, we trust that you know that there are 613 commands, 365 prohibitions, and 248 positive precepts. Which one is the most important? Do you accept all parts of the law as binding? Or do you play favorites? Tell us, Jesus! Put your

money down on one of the commands, prohibitions, or precepts. This is bound to get you into a little trouble!”

You masters of confusion, complexity, convolutedness, it’s all very simple, Jesus says. You want to make it complex; that serves your purposes. Let’s be honest, confusion and complexity can serve the needs of the powerful, the ones who want to be in charge, or at least the ones who want to rank themselves over against others. If it’s complex, then you *need* to come to the experts, *need* to come to the ones who can tell you what you must do to get to the top; you *need* a lawyer.

Well, Mister Lawyer, it’s quite simple. Put all your legal jargon and assumptions behind you. What life is all about, what the law is all about is loving God and loving the neighbor. “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” On these two simple commands hangs our whole tradition. All you need is love! It is that simple!

Those of you who are looking for a little more spice for your late night reading might consider a nightly confrontation with the Book of Leviticus from the Bible. It really is a fascinating read—okay, if not fascinating, weird! All of your reading needs concerning corpses, leprosy, clean and unclean foods, dealing with corpses, the slaughtering of animals, and the eating of blood could be yours if you would just pick up the Book of Leviticus. Now, when you pick it up you will start to think that it all sounds so complex. You will be confounded by what appears to you to be an enormous number of details. But really the message of this book is much simpler than you will think.

Actually, its message is discovered in our first lesson for today, a message that is put on the lips of Moses who is speaking for God: “You

shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” God is different. God is unique. God is set apart. God is other, is holy. And this God is discovered in the details. So in the details, the calling is, we are to be holy, set apart, unique. We aren’t to be like everybody else. We are to be different. And what does that difference look like? That difference looks like love in every aspect of living. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against others. You shall practice justice in the courtroom, not showing favoritism to anyone. You shall not slander people. You shall not benefit from people’s misfortune. The difference looks like love. It’s really quite simple: “All you need is love.”

Unfortunately for us Americans, when we hear that kind of message we receive it through ears that have been shaped by modern psychology, modern America’s emphasis on love as a warm, spine-tingling feeling. I have to admit that I like warm, spine-tingling feelings. I like it when I am feeling warm and positive toward other people. But this is not what the simple, straight-forward message of the Bible is for us today. All you need is love—all you need is to feel warm and gushy toward other people. Warmth and gushiness are nice, but they are not what the Bible means by love.

I suspect that my wife wasn’t feeling overly warm and gushy toward me this past week. I mean, can you believe it? There are times when I don’t feel warm and gushy toward her. There are times when I don’t always feel warm and gushy toward you. And, as hard as it is to believe, there are probably times when you don’t feel warm and gushy toward me. But that is okay because real love is not about warm feelings; it is about a commitment to the well being of the other. True love is as much, if not more, an action as it is a feeling. True love acts

on behalf of the other. True love makes sure that the courtroom is a fair place for all people. True love refuses to tear people down. True love works to do good for the neighbor or, as Jesus would teach, the enemy. True love reproves the neighbor when the neighbor needs a little reproving, a little correcting, a little straightening out. True love does as well as feels.

I've said this many times before, but I'll say it again. Sometimes, reflecting the wisdom of the twelve step movement, we need to act our way into feeling different. Many of us think that we will do good things for other people when we start to feel better about them. But sometimes we have it backwards. Sometimes only when we do on behalf of the other will we begin to feel different about the other.

The book of First John tells us that the message about God is quite simple, and that is, that God is love. But listen to how First John describes that love: "God's love was revealed among us in this way— God sent his only Son into the world . . . In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." God loved so God did. God loved so God acted. God gave. We live our lives indebted to the God who acts out of love on our behalf. We live indebted to the God, not who always feels warm and gushy toward us—we know better than that—but who gives and gives and gives to us.

This is the simple truth. Our God is different. Our God is holy. Our God loves. Now you know what to do. It's quite simple. Be holy. Be different. Love!