

**“Who flips your switch?”
Matthew 22:34-46**

I was in a meeting, a very specific type of meeting called a Parent-Teacher Conference. I was the parent. Also in attendance at this meeting were the five teachers in whose various classes my daughter was enrolled. The reason for this meeting was to discuss, plan, and coordinate a strategy by which my daughter would be encouraged and helped to engage with the subjects in which she was enrolled. The reason we were having the meeting was because that wasn't actually happening at the moment, and I wanted to do all that I could to help her successfully complete Middle School.

The teachers were very helpful in explaining what their expectations were and the assignments that were to be completed and how we could all coordinate together to hold my daughter accountable. She wasn't actually at this meeting.

At one point in the discussion one of the teachers, I think he was probably the most experienced of everyone in this circle of concern said very quietly, “You know, all of these plans we are making are all good, and we do need to do all that we can and follow through, but my experience with this age child is that we can make all the plans we want, but until the light comes on your daughter is not going to really engage with her studies.”

I left that meeting with all my notes in hand, and to the best of my ability I did follow through, but the words of that teacher resonated in my heart. They echoed back to me in the form of a question, “Then how do you help turn the light on? How can you help her to flip the switch to the desire to learn and to follow through with that desire?”

That Parent-Teacher Conference was almost fifteen years ago and that question still echoes in my heart, “How do you turn the light on for someone else?” Today's gospel is also a kind of conference; it is a conference of teachers for the Pharisees knew a lot about the law. So when the lawyer among them asked Jesus which commandment in the law was the greatest, it was very clear that not just any answer would do.

All of the Pharisees knew, for they had counted them, that there were exactly 613 commandments in the law. There were 248 positive commands – this corresponded to the number of parts of a human body. And there were 365 negative commands, a number equaling the number of days in the Hebrew year, and for the devout there was a great reverence for each of them as equally binding. But Jesus does more than answer the lawyer's request for a single command- he gives them two. Jesus is saying that these two are so close that one without the other is missing something very vital.

Let's look more closely at Jesus answer, for after all, he fully realized that he was answering the question of a lawyer. First of all, by his answer Jesus makes very clear that some portions of scripture have priority over others.

Do you remember the young enthusiast who insisted that the Bible was all the word of God, "I'll just turn to any page and do what it says!" He opened his Bible, closed his eyes and ran his finger down the page and stopped on this verse, "Judas went out and hanged himself."

"Wait a minute" he said, "Something must have gone wrong. My finger must have slipped. I will try again." He opened the good book and let the pages open up again. This time the verse by his finger said, "Go thou and do likewise."

He was very confused and so made a third attempt. This time the verse said, "What you must do, do quickly." Whenever I hear someone announce that they believe the Bible to be literally true, I am suspicious that what is meant but left unsaid that they believe the Bible to literally mean what they believe it to mean. Jesus is clear here that it is very important how scripture is interpreted.

Jesus quotes what is known as the Shema which is found in Deuteronomy 6:4. He is saying that even though circumstances may change; various disciplines may change; culture obviously and inevitably changes; expectations and customs and styles all change, but the principles of love and life do not change.

When Jesus does quote scripture he is quite careful. He does not just blindly recite what he has memorized. He may leave out part of the verse; he may even change some of the words. For example, when Jesus announces his mission by quoting from Isaiah 61 he talks about bringing good news to the poor and proclaiming release to the captives, but he very intentionally leaves out all the violent parts in Isaiah. In Matthew 5 Jesus quotes "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" that is a portion of what is found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy¹, but then he turns those scriptures on their head by saying "but I say to you "Turn the other cheek."² This is literally different. Jesus is using both his heart and his head.

So when he is asked "What is the greatest commandment?" he did not reply quickly or arbitrarily with something like, "whoever curses his mother or father shall be put to death," even though that is certainly scriptural. Rather he searched, with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his mind, for that commandment which summed up the relational principle by which all the rest must be interpreted. This is the commandment by which all the other laws are to be understood, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

¹ Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21

² Matthew 5:38-40

All students of the Old Testament know that this is a direct quote from Deuteronomy 6:5, the Shema of Israel which every good Jew recited daily in prayer:

Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

But wait a second there. That is not exactly what Jesus said. Deuteronomy 6:5 says "love God with all your might." Jesus said "love God with all your MIND." Something has changed here. Maybe the writer of Matthew just got it wrong, but when we check the way Luke and Mark write about this they also have Jesus saying, "...with all your mind" rather than "all your might" as well.

What's the difference, you might very well ask? On one level, there is not a whole lot of difference; we are to love God with all that we are, but to say specifically "Love God with all of your mind" does mean something in particular. It means "use your head; figure it out." Loving God requires some thinking. Love is more than just sentiment; it is more than just warm religious feeling and feelings of good will. Good love involves good thinking and good thinking can be difficult. Good thinking can cause us to seriously consider things like contradiction and paradox. We might even notice them in scripture, and that is a good thing to notice them in scripture because that is an indication that we are on the right track, for paradox is especially the enemy of fundamentalism which wants all truth to be rigid and absolutely consistent. Paradox, on the other hand opens the door to mystery and awe and wonder and each of those is the enemy of fundamentalism.

So it is that after Jesus answers the question of the lawyer he asks a question of his own to the Pharisees. It is a question of paradox, "If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" That paradoxical question silences them. Paradox is the stuff of creativity. A 19th Century theologian Søren Kierkegaard put it this way, "The thinker who is devoid of paradox is like the lover who is devoid of passion."

Jesus knew how to love and he knew how to think as well, but Jesus knew that the objective of loving and the objective of thinking are never ends in themselves. Their true object is the worship of God.

You may have heard of the story of the captain of a large sea tanker at the helm of his ship on a stormy sea. He saw a light dead ahead of his tanker. He directed his signalman to quickly flash a signal to the light which went.

"Change course 10 degrees south."

Just as quickly the reply came back, "You change course 10 degrees North."

The captain was a little annoyed at this reply and sent a further message, "I am a captain. Change course 10 degrees South."

Back came the reply, "I am an able seaman. Change course 10 degrees North."

The captain was outraged at this reply and sent a message, "I am a 240,000 Ton tanker. Change course 10 degrees South!"

Back came the reply, "I am a lighthouse. Change course 10 degrees North!!!"

I am afraid that many of us have heard this command to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind, even all our might, if you prefer that way, so many times that we pay it no more mind than the safety instructions given us by a stewardess at the beginning of a flight. And the second one about "loving your neighbor" –well as long as they are nice to me I will be nice to them!

In worship we bring all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our mind and we surrender to the one who not only loves us but creates us with the capacity to love in return. We worship not only the one who says "I am the light of the world" but also the one who creates all light itself. Between Jesus, the one who says "I am the light of the world" and the Abba Father who creates both the light and the dark there emanates forth the Holy Spirit, and it is the work of the Holy Spirit to activate the switch in every human soul, in God's way and in God's timing. That timing is always NOW – so the eternal question for us is "what are we waiting for?"

Two final observations: one about the interaction between the lighthouse and the tanker. The larger the tanker, the more difficult it will be to change course. The same holds true of us as well. The larger our ego, the more false pride we harbor, the more confident we are of our own self-righteousness, the more unwieldy and less spiritually nimble we will be. Approaching God is always about us being emptied of everything that separates us from God and our neighbor.

The second is this. Did you notice that after these questions; in fact after each of these questions it says the Pharisees, the Saducees, the Herodians, whoever it happened to be, they all withdrew and left Jesus, they let their fear overcome their faith.

That is the limit of the lighthouse analogy. Yes, it is us who need to be changed by God's love, but not to steer clear of God, to get out of his way so to speak. When the switch of the Light of God's love is finally illuminated in our lives we begin to see within our hearts that through his Holy Spirit God desires nothing less than to draw us close to himself to love us and to be at one with us, all of us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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 26 October 2008