

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
29 October 2023

Matthew 22:34-46

Last week, the clergy of this Diocese were introduced to Daryl Davis, one of the guests at our clergy conference. Davis is “an international recording artist, actor and leader of The Daryl Davis Band. He is considered to be one of the greatest Blues & Boogie Woogie and Blues and Rock’n’Roll pianists of all time, having played with *The Legendary Blues Band* (formerly the Muddy Waters band) and Chuck Berry. As an Actor, Daryl has received rave reviews for his (acting... and... roles in the critically acclaimed HBO television series *The Wire*. As a race relations expert, Daryl has received acclaim for his book, *Klan-Destine Relationships* and his documentary *Accidental Courtesy* (CNN, NBC, Good Morning America, TLC, NPR, The Washington Post, and many others.) He is also the recipient of numerous awards... (and left all his hearers feeling empowered to confront our own prejudices and overcome our fears.” ([Website](#).)

Last week we talked about the multiple attacks Jesus has been experiencing during one of the longest days of his ministry in the Gospel of Matthew. He has been in Jerusalem now for two days in what we call “Holy Week.” We know that soon he will be arrested and killed. The elders and scribes have challenged him about his authority, Pharisees and Herodians have joined forces to test him on the propriety of paying taxes to Caesar, the Sadducees have questioned him about the resurrection, and now a lawyer comes to lay a trap for him about the greatest commandment. Each of these tests represented two opposite views. In the polarized society of Jesus’s day, how he answered these questions determined whether the masses will stay with him and offer protection, or whether the accusers would have enough evidence to charge Jesus with sedition against the Roman Empire. Both extremes were dangerous for Jesus, and he answers all these questions by adopting a “this-and-also that” approach. He does not allow himself to be polarized into the known binaries of the day. He avoids extremism, but his answers are not watered down theology. Just the opposite, each of these answers raises up the ante, adds another layer of responsibility to the original command.

We saw the “This and also that” last week on the issue of taxation. “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give God what belongs to God.” This is a radical approach that acknowledges the rights of civil government, while

emphasizing God's own rights. Jesus increased the reach of the precept to include a requirement that other party did not expect. Although Ceasar has the rights to our tax money, God claims ownership over the totality of our lives because we bear his imprint, we were made in his image. In the issue of the resurrection, we see that the woman who married seven brothers is rewarded with resurrection, as are her seven husbands, but we see "also that" she is no longer bound to any of them because there is no need for marriage in heaven. The rules of marriage no longer apply, the genders are equal in God's presence and there is no power imbalance and a sense of ownership over a spouse. The rules of the kingdom do not allow for classes, gender imbalances, stratification in accordance to status, wealth, or ethnicity. There is no giving or taking, but rather a sharing in the same loving reality that emanates from God's love and unmerited grace.

Today, we also see a "this-and-also-that" approach to the latest question. As with every question posed to Jesus, this one also has two extreme positions in competition with each other. The Sadducees and others believe that the love of neighbor is the highest commandment given in the Law of Moses. In fact, "according to the Jerusalem Talmud (circa 4th century CE) Rabbi Akiva—who was born around fifty years after Jesus—says that the Levitical command to 'love your neighbor as yourself' is the great principle of the Torah. A famous story preserved in the Babylonian Talmud (circa 600 CE) states that the renowned first-century sage Hillel once paraphrased Leviticus 19:18 for a non-Jew, saying, 'Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is all the Torah, the rest is commentary. Go study.'" ([See commentary here.](#))

There are others, however, like the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who wholeheartedly believe the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is the center and highest principle of the Law or the teachings of Moses. The Shema, as I told you last week, is the famous, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength." If Jesus affirms Leviticus 19:18, he risks upsetting this group. If he affirms Shema, he risks upsetting the Sadducees and others. A marriage of both precepts presents a whole picture to their partial view of the Law. It is both, not one at the expense of the other, but both precepts. And Jesus goes one step forward. He makes both principles like each other, equal in importance. It is neither one or the other, but both at the same time. To love God above all things and to love neighbors as yourself. This is the complete law and a summary of the prophets and the other writings in the Jewish Scripture.

Today, Jesus passes the test by not allowing his opponents to radicalize him and force him to choose a side, settle for a half answer, or create enmity between two different understandings of the Jewish Law. In this I see a great example for us. We live in a polarized world where “Either/Or” have become the lens through which we see each other, we read scripture, we engage in dialogue, and we ascribe value to people or things. Many of us believe in black and white realities. Things are rather black or white. Jesus presents a reality where a multiplicity of colors join to form a unified reality that is beautiful to behold. We lead our lives in binary struggle between two and only two possible realities, yet Scripture often presents us with a third or fourth alternative where seemingly opposite ideas or realities are joined to create a more complete, more beautiful reality. Life is much easier when we can classify people as better or worse, good or evil, right or wrong, righteous or unrighteous, one of us or one of them. If we know who our enemies are, then we can dig our fighting trenches, find our armament, amass our ammunitions, reinforce our positions, and get ready for the fight. But life is seldom, if ever, this simple. Life is not black and white. Life is seldom either/or. Most often, life is a “both/and” rather than an “either/or.”

Better yet, sometimes God allows thistles and tares to become beautiful wheat and barley. Sometimes God uses people we have placed in the “expect nothing from this person” category to bless our life and the life of others. By allowing ourselves to become so polarized, we welcome enmity and distraction into our lives. A better approach is to learn to love people for whom they are, regardless of whether they agree with us or not, regardless of whether their philosophical or ideological stance fits within our view of the world. We are entering a highly charged political campaigning season, and the media will ask us to take sides, to identify those people we hate early on, to begin to sharpen our knives, and to rehearse well our particular rhetoric. But I wonder what would happen if instead, we chose to listen intently, we become curious about the other, we truly learn the other person’s position, and we learn to love them for who they are, rather than wanting to create them in our own image because that’s the only way we can love them.

People are complicated and there is a lot we can dislike about many people, but underneath it all, each one of us wants to be heard, to be respected, and to be loved. I pray for the gift of acceptance and humility for all of us today. Amen!