

“The Last Question”
Matthew 22:34-46, Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
November 12, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings
The last question reveals that the real issue is love

Recently, I was surprised to get a call from a friend of mine from high school. We had gone to church youth group together, but I don't think I've seen her in 35 years at least. We've connected on Facebook and the occasional email and she knows that I'm a minister, but not too much more than that. But she called because she wanted to ask me some questions. She was concerned about her son. The church we grew up in is pretty conservative theologically, and she has remained conservative, so it disturbed her when her son let her know that he was gay. And she wanted to talk to someone about what that meant, what the Bible said about it, and she wanted to talk with someone who wasn't right there in town with her family and her church, and so she called me. She asked me what I thought, about the Biblical texts that seem to forbid same-sex relationships. She asked me what I thought God's feeling toward her son would be. After several questions, and after a long pause, she finally asked me if I thought that perhaps her son was gay because she hadn't loved him enough. And I thought to myself, “Finally, the real question.” I affirmed to her that I didn't believe that one person can “turn” another's sexual orientation, that we are what God has made us. But I knew the real question was about love. It often is. I asked her if she loved her son today and said, “Of course I do!” Then I suggested that's all she really needed to do at this point, to love him, to pray for him, and to love him more—no matter what.

The last question is often the real question, and it's often about love.

That's the way it was with Jesus too. He had come into Jerusalem and into a firestorm of controversy. Many people and groups who were gathered there for the Passover wanted to hear what this new teacher had to say, so they were full of questions. The religious leaders wanted to find fault in him, so they had questions for him too.

“Who is this?” the whole city asks on Palm Sunday.

“Do you hear what they are saying?” ask the shocked priests and scribes when the crowd chants

“Hosanna.”

“By what authority do you do these things?”

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

And finally, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

But they all know the answer to that. The Shema, the Jewish statement of faith, the words that every good Jew says before beginning of every service in the synagogue “Hear, O Israel, you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and all your mind and all your strength.”

It's the last question they ask Jesus, and it's about love. Whether it is a situation with a counselor, or you're talking with a friend, or there's a conflict to be worked out, many times it is the last question, the one that person has been waiting to ask, trying to find a way to ask, that is the most important. And that's the question that comes to Jesus, “What is most important?” The answer: love.

Love God and love your neighbor. That sounds simple, doesn't it? Love God, that's the first command, the second, love your neighbor as yourself.

Lucia Roberts, the wife of Dr. Evor Roberts, was a grandmother to our children, a mother to me and my

wife, Erin. Nana Lucia, as she was known in our house. And when Nana Lucia would talk about difficult things, hurtful things in the world, in our community, families, this church, and considering her response, she would always say it comes down to one simple question: what is the loving thing to do? Not what is the best argument, the best way to defend yourself or get what you want. Lucia's faith taught her the same thing that Jesus was trying to teach the people in Jerusalem that day: it's all about love. Lucia would approach a problem or a person with the same idea in her mind, "What's the loving thing to do?" And she taught me that when we speak about love from a Christian point of view, it doesn't really have anything to do with feelings. It doesn't matter how you *feel*, but what's the loving thing to *do*? When Jesus says that we can boil all the laws down to two simple concepts, love God and love your neighbor, he doesn't mean that we have to feel all warm and fuzzy when we pray. We don't have to feel love toward God. We don't have to feel love when we are with our neighbor. We have *to* love. We have to *act* with love. We have to *do* the loving thing maybe even in spite of what we might feel at the time.

That is what "being the Church" means. We are called to love God the way that Jesus says God loves us. How do we do that? Frederick Buechner says, "Loving God means rejoicing in him. It means trusting him when you can think of a hundred reasons not to trust anything. It means praying to him even when you don't feel like it. It means watching for him in the beauty and sadness and gladness and mystery of your own life and of life around you."¹

Just so, loving each other doesn't mean loving each other in a sentimental way but in the way families love each other even though they may fight and drive each other crazy but who know in their hearts that they need each other and belong to each other and couldn't do without each other. We act lovingly toward each other.

1 Buechner, Frederick. *The Clown in the Belfry*. p. 154

Loving God and loving your neighbor: these two things must go together. Jesus links them and says that one is like another. We read the passage from Leviticus today because that's what Jesus was quoting when he was asked this question. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "Jesus' teaching on the greatest commandment mirrors Leviticus's move from relationship with God to relationship with neighbor. These relationships may be sequential, but they are not separate. One cannot love God and slander the neighbor, any more than one can love the neighbor without loving God. There is only one love, which unites all who practice it with its source."²

There is only one love. Loving God and loving the neighbor and loving the enemy and loving God's creation and loving yourself—in the end, it's all about love, and there is only one love.

So how do we do this? How do we do love? How do we act lovingly toward God and neighbor? Well, for us it is to be the church. Be the light of the world—where there are dark places in the world or in the lives of others, shine some light. Be the salt of the earth, bring out the flavor of God's creation, preserve what is good, make people thirsty for more. Jesus tells his disciples to heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons. Do we do that? The person sick in the hospital, maybe her real sickness is that she is scared and lonely and wishes she had someone to talk to. Heal her. Maybe the angry man in the grocery store has stopped believing in God because it is pointless and no one does anything good any more, people just care about themselves, and hope has died in him. Raise him from the dead. And the youth who is headed out to juvenile detention and is depressed because no one will visit him there and there is no one who loves him just as he is, and those demons afflict his soul. Cast them out. Love. In the end, that's what matters. That's the stewardship of the church in the world. That's what the Kingdom of heaven looks like.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*. p. 199

When I was in seminary in New Jersey, it was sometimes a lonely life. I did not live on the seminary campus after the first semester and it was not always so easy to make new friends. I had a friend from high school, Greg, who I'd shared this with. Greg was in medical school in Columbus, Ohio and I remember saying to him that if he ever found himself on a break and wanting to go farther east, he should come meet me in Princeton. He said, "maybe I'll do that." It was the expected polite response you might get from someone who inwardly calculated the distance between Columbus Ohio and Princeton NJ and recognized that it was hardly a quick jaunt to the next town over.

Then one spring night, my phone rang, and it was Greg. He asked me if I was serious about him coming to Princeton for a visit sometime. I said, "Sure, I'd love to have you anytime." And he said, "Good, because I'm in a phone booth outside the Princeton bus station and it's cold! Come pick me up." He had come because somehow, he knew that I needed a friend to come. He had come without even asking because he probably knew that I would tell him not to go to the trouble. But he came, and he stayed for a few days. You know, the funny thing is that I don't remember anything that we did while he was there. But I remember that he was there.

That's what is important: I remember that he was there.

Because he's my friend and loves me. I've never forgotten it, and I doubt he has either. Because this is what the kingdom of heaven looks like. A phone booth in Princeton on a cold night. Or it looks like 35 youth running around the church a couple of days before Halloween—why do they do that? Because of love. Or a prayer vigil with candles illuminating the dark because we're tired of gun violence. Because of love. Or a few people sitting around a table in the basement of the church, asking questions about God and life and heaven and hell and about what is truly important.

The last question is the important one, and it's often about love. Love has the final word.

What can you do today? How can you love God and your neighbor? There are lots of ways. What's the loving thing for you to do? Give yourself—knit a prayer shawl, help with a dinner, sub for the food pantry, visit the sick, pray for the church. All of us can do something, all of us can love.

And this is another way. These pledge cards are how we work together in love. It's hearing God's commandment. Love one another. Love God. Here's how: be part of the church, be part of the spreading of God's love. In a few minutes we are going to stand and sing “We Give Thee But Thine Own,” but before we do that, we are going to have a few moments of quiet. During that time, we'd like you to fill out the pledge card if you haven't already. And then when we stand to sing the hymn, we want you to come up whenever you want and bring your card and put it in the basket. If you don't want to come up yourself, the ushers will be in the aisles and can take it up for you. Remember, it's about love. God's love for us, our love for him and each other and the myriad ways that we know it. It's a loving thing to do.