

Radical Jesus

Text: Matthew 22:34-40

A few moments ago, Jim Kennedy read for us Matthew 22:34-40, and the Jesus we encounter here is certainly not the meek and mild Jesus we all thought we knew. This is not the sugar-sweet, inoffensive, ingratiating Jesus we might imagine flitting about the countryside, picking flowers, cozing up to the crowds, and patting little children on the head.

In short, the Jesus portrayed in Matthew 22:34-40 is not some insipid nice guy

On the contrary! In this scripture passage the gospel writer Matthew portrays the passionate Jesus - a Jesus capable of arousing powerful feelings - a hostile Jesus – a courageous Jesus - an intellectually brilliant and authoritative Jesus who, at every turn, can out argue and best his adversaries - and most important of all, the Jesus we meet in Matthew 22: 34 - 40 is the radical, revolutionary and subversive Jesus.

Or to come at all this from a slightly different angle, the Jesus we meet in this morning's gospel text is the Jesus who discovered in his life and during his public ministry that there are some things in life worth getting emotionally and intellectually fired up about – things worth arguing about –

things that demand we must be, all at once, loving, passionate, compassionate, truth-telling, social justice-oriented and formidable in the cause of the commonwealth of God.

For a few moments, then, let's review this story.

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According to the storyteller we've named Matthew, Jesus has been teaching in the temple in Jerusalem for several days. Time and time again, his adversaries challenge him. They try to get him into big trouble with the Roman and Temple authorities. They try to entangle him in political, legal, theological and religious word games. And every time Jesus' brilliant answers have muzzled these adversarial tricksters – silenced them; and according to Matthew's gospel, Jesus' religious, political and theological opponents went away astounded, dumbfounded and amazed.

But as we discover from this morning's lectionary reading from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus' adversaries haven't finished with him yet. Not by a long shot! Once more, they conspire against him. This time they choose a lawyer - or more accurately, a topnotch professor of law, or better yet, an expert in Torah, the Jewish law - to go up against Jesus; or more accurately, to get in his face, and up his nose, and under his skin.

This brilliant legal scholar addresses Jesus, respectfully as “teacher”, and then asks him which commandment is the greatest. What this sly fellow is asking is this: which of the 613 laws in the Law of Moses is the most important. For Jesus, it seems to be a Catch-22 situation. No matter which law Jesus picks, the lawyer is going to ask him why he didn’t choose one of the other ones.

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As you listen to this story in the 22nd chapter of Matthew’s gospel, you can almost see and hear the sneering questioner: **SO, WHICH ONE IS IT, JESUS? WHICH LAW IS THE GREATEST?**

The gospel writer, Matthew tells us that Jesus answered, or more accurately “fired back” at this legal expert quoting Deuteronomy 6:5: YOU ARE TO LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND ALL YOUR SOUL AND ALL YOUR MIND. It’s important to note that Jesus actually changed this ancient statement of faith. Deuteronomy 6:5 ends with the injunction to love God with all your ‘strength’ or ‘power’. But Jesus changed Deuteronomy’s words ‘strength’ and ‘power’ to ‘thought’ or ‘mind’. So his version reads, LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR THOUGHT or ALL YOUR MIND.

Then Jesus adds to this quotation from Deuteronomy another from Leviticus 19: **YOU ARE TO LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF.** These two commandments are inseparable; or as Jesus puts it, **ON THESE TWO COMMANDMENTS HANGS EVERYTHING IN THE LAW AND PROPHETS.**

And we should note too that, on another occasion Jesus identified the Golden Rule as encompassing the law and prophets. In Matthew 7:12, Jesus is quoted as saying, **TREAT PEOPLE IN WAYS YOU WANT THEM TO TREAT YOU. THIS SUMS UP THE WHOLE OF THE LAW AND PROPHETS.**

In a nutshell, for Jesus, loving God is all about passionately loving people; and loving people is all about compassion, truth-telling, justice-seeking and intentionally taking action.

WHAT DOES THAT KIND OF LOVE LOOK LIKE?

For Jesus, that kind of love – love of God and love of neighbour - love as compassion, truth-telling and justice-seeking - and love as an action word - was risky, demanding and dangerous – even deadly. Yet, that is the path he chose to follow.

We can see the depth of that kind of love – the love that inspired Jesus when he challenged his adversaries, debated his opponents, embraced the untouchable, shared meals with the outcast, confronted the demonic, empowered the powerless, identified with the landless and indebted Galilean peasant, corrected the theologically and religiously clueless, and empathized with the exploited and oppressed.

Because he has been inspired and motivated by that kind of love, Jesus is no pushover. Here, in this morning's gospel text, we encounter the fully human Jesus – i.e. the radical Jesus – the revolutionary Jesus - the subversive Jesus. Here we encounter Jesus inspired by love for God and neighbour not as two separate commandments but as those two commandments meaning one and the same. Here, we meet Matthew's Jesus, motivated by love as compassionate, passionate, truth-telling, and justice-seeking action.

SO WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR US GATHERED HERE THIS MORNING?

It means that “gentle Jesus, meek and mild”, does not exist, and has never existed except perhaps in somebody's wistful imagination or some hymn writer's nostalgic yearning.

It means Jesus as some insipid nice guy is, in fact, flawed – a fabrication – a falsehood, a pretense. So let's stop pretending.

It means too that we have to stop using the word “love” when in reality it's just an excuse for taking the path of least resistance or equivocation when uncomfortable truth-telling and confrontation are demanded.

And this is especially true for the church because all too often the word “love” is used as an excuse for “a dumbed down faith-understanding” – i.e. as an excuse for religious illiteracy, or biblical literalism, or mistaken or downright false moral and ethical rationalizing, or theological ineptitude.

And finally, it also means the love Jesus proclaimed and lived by – i.e. loving God and loving people – i.e. love as compassion, truth-telling, justice-seeking and action – (that kind of love) demands we expand ourselves as individuals and as a faith community to strive to be the best we can be in all we think, in all we say and all we do.

May it be so. Amen.

Hymn: VU 574, Come, Let Us Sing of a Wonderful Love, vs. 1 and 2 (Duet by Bev Marshall and Kathleen Paterson)

Some Resources for This Sermon

Brown, Jeanine K: Commentary on Matthew 22:34-46, <http://www.workingpreacher.org>

Cain, Marvin: Jesus The Man: An Introduction for People At Home In The Modern World, Polebridge Press, 1999

Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, The Five Gospels, Polebridge Press, 1993

Greene, Martha: "Jesus' final Exam", Matthew 22:34-46, *The Christian Century*, October 9, 2002, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2002-10/jesus-final-exam>

Lectionary blogging: Matthew 22:34-46, <https://www.progressiveinvolvement.com>

Lewis, Karoline: "Commentary on Matthew 22:34-46" by Lance Pape, <https://www.workingpreacher.org>

