Matthew 22:34-46

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.36‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’37He said to him, ‘ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”38This is the greatest and first commandment.39And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

**The Question about David’s Son**

41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42‘What do you think of the Messiah?\* Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’43He said to them, ‘How is it then that David by the Spirit\* calls him Lord, saying,
44 “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’ ? 45If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’ 46No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

“What do you think of the Messiah?”

In the past few weeks in our Gospel readings, we’ve heard named an assortment of religious sects within Judaism in Jesus’ time: Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, Priests and Elders, and you have the disciples of John the Baptist, most likely a group known as Essenes. You might get the impression that everyone was fighting everyone else. Sadducees might argue that there is no resurrection of the dead, and Pharisees might claim the to be a good Jew you must adhere strictly to the entire law, and the Herodians believed that it was okay to adapt to the ways of Greco-Roman culture, and the Essenes might believe that to be God’s people you had to isolate yourself from the entire corrupt culture, all of these factions were minorities.

What about the average Joe or Jane? Most of the people were “people of the land” (*am-ha-aretz*), the salt of the earth, so to speak, and most likely they didn’t concern themselves so much with the religious arguments. This is not to say that religion was not an important part of their lives; the Jews were very conscious that they were God’s chosen people. They worshiped and prayed and made offerings and sacrifices. They celebrated Passover and the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Booths, and they observed the Sabbath. They read scripture and celebrated the salvation that God wrought for them, their freedom from slavery and their conquest of the Promised Land. They had a lot of reason to worship God and celebrate.

But the average Jew knew that something wasn’t right. Something else needed to be done. They were living in the promised land, but a good portion of what they produced was going to Rome. They celebrated their deliverance form slavery in Egypt, but their king and their priests were puppet rulers who, in the eyes of many, had compromised worship of the true God by even allowing sacrifices to the Roman Emperor to occur in the temple. Most people also resented the fact that their king and priests lived lavish lifestyles while they were required to support them through heavy taxes, enforced by Roman soldiers.

What kept the Jews from capitulating, from losing their identity and their dignity was the promise of a new Messiah. The prophets who warned the people, particularly the rulers, of the suffering and ordeals they would go through as a people also ensured them that God would deliver them from their current persecution by way of His Messiah, a new savior, greater than Moses who would cleanse the Temple of the corrupt influences and lead the people out of slavery again and into freedom.

You could say that the expectation for a Messiah had reached a fever pitch in Jesus’ day. Things were so bad for the “people of the land” that they were looking under rocks for a Messiah (and things really aren’t that different today; people who feel look negatively upon the state of the world are more likely to believe that the world is coming to an end soon). And the longer the Jews were enslaved, and the more they suffered, the more they longed for the Messiah to come, and the more powerful they imaged their Messiah would be – He’d have to be powerful to defeat the Romans and break the power of the priesthood.

The reason I give you this background is that today’s Gospel reading has everything to do with the coming of the Messiah. What I pray that you take from today’s sermon is a profound sense of awe at who Jesus is. Because if you know Jesus Christ and who he is, everything else that’s involved in discipleship will come naturally. Knowing who Jesus is propels you into discipleship, because all Jesus will have to say is, “follow me,” and you’ll be just like the first disciples – you’ll drop everything and follow him.

So Jesus is in the Temple, and he’s been asked an assortment of questions by an assortment of scholars, rabbis, priests, all the questions designed to somehow get Jesus in trouble with the Romans or to tarnish his image with his many followers. Jesus has dealt with each attack and left his opponents pretty much defeated. But the Pharisees fire one more volley. They ask him, “which commandment of the law is the greatest?” Now the Pharisees believed in 613 laws, given by God through Moses. So to say that any one of them was the greatest would lead the Pharisees to ask, “Well what about this one? Or this one? They’re all *God’s* commandments, and we’re expected to keep all of God’s commandments.”

Jesus’ answer, however, covers all the bases: Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind…and love your neighbor as yourself…and by the way, all of your other 611 laws as well as the words of the prophets, they hang on these two laws.” It’s all about love: love of God; love of neighbor. The end, fini. Case closed.

Now what Jesus said is really not that unique; every religion has a way of stating love your neighbor as yourself. Most other religions stipulate that you must love God, whatever name he might take in other relgions. Nothing new here.

Our problem comes with the word “love.” It’s a word that is way overused and under-defined in our culture. We speak of loving cars, movies, cell phones, and restaurants the same way we speak of loving another human being, and too often we mean the same thing. I love that movie because it makes me feel happy or excited or inspired: I love this person for the same reason (she/he makes me happy or excited or inspired). The Greek language gives us four words for love: eros, philia, storge, and agape. What we usually mean in our culture when we hear people say love is eros. It’s a feeling we get. Philia is brotherly love, brotherly in the sense of kinship, hence the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. Storge is family love, like a mother to her son or daughter. Finally there is agape, which is the highest form of love, and it’s the word that Jesus uses when he says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Agape is a love that is not contingent upon kinship or family. It doesn’t depend upon a feeling. It has no strings attached. It’s a love that we cultivate by placing other people’s needs ahead of our own, and though we cultivate it, do we ever really harvest it? How well do we place other’s needs *before our own?* Would we really give up our home, our car, our season tickets, our boat to someone else who needs it more than we need it? It’s interesting that we can speak of such love, and every culture and every religion can speak of such love, and command such love, but do any of us ever achieve it?

And this is why I find it so profound that after stating that we are to love God and love neighbor with this ideal love that he brings up the subject of the Messiah, the Christ: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” And the common belief was that the Messiah was David’s son, which means that common understanding was that the Messiah would be someone *like* David; a warrior king who would vanquish his enemies and by sheer power and might establish his kingdom and make his capital in Jerusalem. Those were the good old days, weren’t they? Israel had their own King, temple worship was neat and clean, we didn’t have to worry about those smelly Philistines raiding our villages. True that compared to the Romans, David might be a good substitute, but if you go way back to the first book of Samuel, when the people are clamoring for a king, and God tells them, “Fine, but…you will be his slaves.” Will a king like David “love you as he loves himself”? Will a king like David place your needs before his own? I seem to remember a woman named Bathsheba, who was the wife of Urriah, one of David’s generals. And David, because he was king, decided to have Bathsheba while Urriah off keeping the kingdom safe for democracy. Then David set Urriah up, in essence assassinated him. And you want your Messiah to be like David?

Because God loves us with that agape love that we find so hard to master, he gives his people a savior much greater than David. He gives us a Messiah who demonstrates his love for us by placing our needs before his own, by giving himself completely for us, by personifying the ideal love that he desires us to have for God and for one another. We can ask for nothing greater. Rather than sending David’s offspring to rescue his people from one despot only to have them fall victim to another, God sends his own son, his own flesh, himself incarnate to demonstrate the ideal love that characterizes God’s rule. And while the Pharisees and Sadducees and Herodians and Priests and Elders all felt threatened by Jesus (they put putting their own interests first), as if he were going to overthrow them by force, Jesus willingly offers his life for their sin, for your sin, for my sin, for that power that just won’t let us love like we’re meant to, that just won’t let us put anyone’s interest before our own.

So what do you think of the Messiah? Can we worship him in awe and wonder at his amazing love? Can we surrender our lives to him the way he surrendered his to us? Today we celebrate the baptism of Carson Sannino, and in this sacrament, we commit ourselves to him, and to his family, and to one another in Christian, agape, love. It’s an ideal that we may never realize in our lifetimes, but we commit ourselves to do our best. And in that sense, this is a true celebration! In a world where so many young people fall victim to drug and alcohol abuse, where so many children are abused physically, verbally, emotionally, where the rate of depression is so high, where the feeling of despair is so prevalent, we, the church, truly stand out as a light to the world. We should feel a sense of relief and responsibility; relief that Carson will be growing up in the church, and responsibility, as his family, to do our absolute best to live up to the ideals that God has asked of us, knowing that by our own power living to such an ideal is impossible, but knowing that through Christ, the Messiah, all things are possible.