



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 22A (Proper 25)

[RCL] Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

Gotcha Questions

Children learn at an early age to measure success by how well they succeed at tests. You are taught to study hard and to engage in class discussions along the way, seeking the necessary insights to excel in your coursework. But often there is one kid in the class—whom others might tag as the “class clown”—who asks the questions not to get the answers, but to get a specific reaction from the instructor. Sometimes the questioner knows the correct answer; other times the conversation is designed purely to provoke a response in the one being questioned.

We see echoes of this familiar scene in the 22nd chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. The Pharisees and the Sadducees take turns asking Jesus what they believe are stumping questions. Are they looking to provoke a response—to anger Jesus? Or are they trying to make him pause, unable to immediately provide an appropriate answer? Consider the very detailed (and rather ludicrous) question inventing a scenario involving remarriage unlikely ever to be tested: who would a woman would belong to if she remained childless through marriages with seven brothers? In a challenge to Jesus’s ideas about the afterlife, they dream up a scenario that has little bearing on how to either live well on earth, much less much wisdom to have about what life will look like in the great beyond.

Now while all this was going on, the Pharisees were looking on. And then they turn to Jesus with the toughest “gotcha” question of all, which they have designated an attorney in their midst to ask. His question: “Teacher which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Perhaps they expected Jesus to take a while, to ponder all of the Jewish laws, to think through all the rites and rituals observed in their community, before giving them a well-thought-out answer. We can only imagine their surprise when Jesus instead immediately responded with this statement, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” He continued with further instruction “This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the laws and the prophets.” The answer was resolute: No hesitation and no caveats were offered by Jesus. That must have silenced the crowd.

These two commandments offer as much a guiding light for contemporary Christian followers today as they did the moment Jesus uttered them to the Pharisees and Sadducees.

We might spend our entire lives trying to find answers to all sorts of profound questions. Some questions will require great theological reflection, like: What is the meaning of life? Or: Where is God in the midst of floods, storms, fires, and natural disasters? Why does God allow gun violence or the ongoing concerns facing so many around immigration?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Some questions might demand a great deal of study. Other no amount of study seems able to answer. Wisdom, perhaps, suggests an acceptance that we are not privy to all the answers.

And even when we do have the answers.... Well, it's not that simple, is it?

When Jesus describes the most important commandment—loving God with all your heart, soul and mind—it seems straightforward. Jesus calls us to put God ahead of everything and everyone.

But will there be challenges to living out the greatest commandment? Without a doubt!

For instance, how do we follow and trust God when we are confronted with pain, suffering, and loss? How do we lean into God in those particular moments, believing that we serve a God who will provide the strength and comfort we need, even if we do not like the outcome?

Faith in God is like a flower that continues to open throughout life. There is no telling how wide the bud will open. However we continue to trust that, with nurture and nourishment, that flower will grow. Faith *grows*. In your own life, look back and reflect on where you have been—which you never could have envisioned from one stage to another. Trust God. Your call is to faithfully live a life that exhibits your love for God.

We see echoes of this call in the Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy. Moses is looking out over the vast landscape—an image which is symbolic of him taking stock of his life, all those events we find covered in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. Moses was the one recruited by God to go to Egypt and bring the Israelites out of the land dominated by King Pharaoh. Moses was the one who would take the Israelites through the desert wilderness, through the Red Sea, to help them get to the place that God had promised—that place flowing with milk and honey.

At the beginning of his ministry, Moses questions God about why *he* is the one to do this work. He asks God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and tell him to release the Israelites and to let God’s people go?” God assures Moses that he is the person for the assignment. Moses, timid as he was, insecure as he felt, also recognized that he loved God so much—with all his heart, soul, and mind—that if God chose him to go to Egypt, then that’s what he had to do.

Beloved, you and I are oftentimes called to things that seem beyond our comprehension and well beyond our capabilities. But when God taps you on the shoulder, and you love God above all things, you will step out in faith to do the thing that God has asked you to do.

Like it did for Moses, there will time when we will be called to set down earthly things. God will say to each of us, “You will not cross over there,” just like he said to Moses. When that time comes, it is another chance to put our trust in God.

The words penned by the composer, Lucie Eddie Campbell put it this way:

Oh, when I come to the end of my journey,
Weary of life and the battle is won,
Carrying the staff and the cross of redemption,
He'll understand and say, well done.

The final phrase of course recalls that line from one of Jesus's parables: “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

Now, those words will not be spoken to us because we answered all the questions right on the test, but because we knew the answer to the question Jesus asks, in several different ways, throughout the Gospel of Matthew, “Who do *you* say that I am?”

Jesus asks a similar question at the end of this exchange with the Pharisees: “What do you think of the Messiah?”

What is *your* answer? This is definitely not a “gotcha” question. Its stakes are real. And your answer has never been more relevant than today.

Amen.

The Rev. Kathleen Walker joined the staff of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina in February 2020 to focus on the continuity and vitality of the dozen Black congregations. The history of the African American tradition in North Carolina is rich and profound. It is important to weave their diversity into a closer bond of inclusion with other parishes and the diocese. The goal is to ensure all predominantly Black congregations have the best opportunity to make the fullest use of the resources of their parishes, partnerships, and the diocese. Currently there are 11 active African American congregations in the diocese and one historical church that is in process of redevelopment. Canon Walker is passionate about sustaining and supporting Black communities in the context of the Episcopal church. Canon Walker graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018. She is currently president of the Alumni Association Executive Committee. She has dedicated many years to the cause of social and racial justice. Rev. Walker is committed to fulfilling the diocese's priority of becoming beloved community as we work through racial reckoning, justice and healing. She is also president of the Rt. Rev. Michael B. Curry chapter of the Union of Black Episcopalians.



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