

Matthew 22:34-40

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

The Greatest Commandment

How come when villains shoot bullets at superman, he stands there and let the bullets hit him, but when they throw the actual gun at him he ducks?

Why is the word abbreviation so long?

Do you find it a bit unnerving that doctors call what they do practice?

What do sheep count when they can't sleep?

Questions. We are filled with them, obsessed with them. I have questions.

Unfortunately, I don't have nearly as many answers as I do questions. Don't you just sit and wonder about things? Take, for instance, when you get on an airplane, and the first thing they tell you about is what to do when the plane crashes. Is that really the best way to

make people feel better? And if they have those little black boxes that survive every crash, couldn't they find a way to make the whole plane out of that stuff? Deep questions these are not, but questions nonetheless, and I occasionally ponder what Noah did with the woodpeckers, or with the termites. I'm a curious individual.

For all of history humans have been a people obsessed with questions, with discovering what has never been answered. Names like Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein and Galileo might mean nothing to us otherwise. They had an insatiable curiosity, a desire to know more, to learn more, about how things work and what we don't know.

This trait is passed on, generation to generation. Each question that is answered seems to generate more questions to ask. Some questions simply have no answers.

I went to a funeral on Tuesday for John Goodlet, a 62 year old who had been living in the Orange Grove Center. He had Down's Syndrome, had always had Down's Syndrome, had not breathed one breath here on this earth without it. The funeral was fun, and we laughed and cried at stories about a man who was known to hoard things such as boxes of plastic gloves and other people's sweaters. It was a celebration of a life filled with bowling and pure enjoyment in the company of family and friends. It was said by his nephew that he spoke the language of genuine love. Through it all, though, I couldn't help but wonder and ask those big questions. Why do children have Down's Syndrome? Why do some get it and not others? It just doesn't seem fair. Those other big questions come up at any

funeral--what can be said of death, the great unknown? What happens after we die? We accept on faith and place our trust in God, but I will admit to staying up at night wondering about death. These are questions I have.

The Pharisees had questions as well. How could they not have? These were the serious religious scholars of the day, the men who sought to live by the letter of the law, and along comes Jesus, proclaiming a new law, a new day, a different type of faith. What they studied, knew and attempted to live was being torn down, so of course they had questions. They weren't ready for change, so they tested Jesus, trying to find some flaw or some reason not to adhere to his teachings. "Which Commandment in the law," one of them, a lawyer, asked, "is the greatest?" If this man is a lawyer, he spends his time studying Mosaic law, and probably knows it as well as we know our own trades. He wants to hear what Jesus has to say about the law, expecting Jesus to pick one commandment and defend it. There is no right answer for Jesus if he does so. Over the last 10 weeks we have explored each commandment, mined it for depth and found so many guidelines for living in each one. How could we ever pick five, let alone one, and let it be first? Each one informs our living before God and our community. Each one is important.

Does Jesus duck in his answer? I don't believe so. He answers in a way the man will understand—the first commandment is the shema, Deuteronomy 6:5, a central text in Jewish life we studied during Vacation Bible School. The second is a text from Leviticus. He answers the lawyer's question, and generates a thousand more questions in doing so.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” That’s not even enough though. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” he includes, as though the first wasn’t demanding enough. He tells us all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. These two sentences sum up all of the commandments, and if we can live by these, then we will be living according to the hundreds and thousands of Old Testament rules.

Just as Pharisees are asking about the law, over the past 3 months we have been asking our own questions about the law. In answering the lawyer’s question, Jesus has answered the question we have been asking over the past 3 months: “How do we live according to these commandments?” And in doing so he has generated so many more. “How do we possibly begin to obey these huge commandments Jesus gives? All of our wandering hearts, all of our curious souls, all of our busy minds? Each of our neighbors, including the loud ones, the nosy ones, the needy ones, the Atheistic ones, the poor ones, the rich ones, the violent ones? All of them? How, Jesus, are we ever going to do this?”

Honestly, it all comes down to one word. It is an active, powerful word, the most powerful word in the English language, in my opinion. The word that is responsible for creation, for salvation, for our eternal hope. Love. It is all about love, and in each moment, we have the option to choose it. When we come before our neighbors, when we sit down in the evening and evaluate our day, when we come to worship, when we are tired, when our children break another dish, when the boss calls us again, in each situation, we have a

choice: We can choose to respond in two ways—either out of anger or impatience, giving in to our weakness, or we can respond in love. Being a Christian means that love is our guide, love is our driving force, and we are, to the best of our ability, called to choose to love each person and each moment. When Joshua stood before the Israelites and said, “as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD,” what he was saying is that in each instance, in each moment he could, he would choose to love God and neighbor and demonstrate that to the best of his ability. We, too, have that choice. We can respond to the world in love, or we can respond with selfishness and weariness.

We have a choice. We are grateful to worship a God who doesn't ever make that choice. God is love. Unending, unyielding, undefeatable love. In all that God does, there is love as a motive. I cannot explain the answers to life's great questions, about death and dying and suffering and sickness, any more than I can stop them with my own hands. But I can point to the God who hung upon a cross, who died between two thieves for all to see and scorn, and I can proclaim that God is love, and that even death was not enough to prevent God from loving us more than we can imagine. I can point to the empty tomb and say that our God defeated sin and death so that we might know and love God in a grateful response to all that God has done. God is love, love that reaches out to us, love that enfolds and embraces us, love that proclaims that we can have hope and joy in our lives because we have nothing to fear from the powers of death. God is love, love that wants us to respond in love, love that wants us to choose love, love that lays itself down for a friend. In the response of Jesus Christ to the Pharisee there is a plea that we choose love, that we make our choice

about who to serve and if we choose God, the God who is love, we must live that same love, with all that we are, to all whom we meet. The Holy Spirit is opening windows in our lives, showing us people and places we are called to love. Just as Christ spread his arms upon the cross to give us the gift of love, may we open ourselves and embrace the world and all that is in it in joyous love.

Let us pray.