

LENT—A JOURNEY TO EASTER
2. IT'S NOT A RELIGION; IT'S A RELATIONSHIP

(02/08/2020)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 22:34-40
John 15:12-17

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37,39)

In our Sunday morning Bible study, we have just begun viewing one of the Great Course DVD courses. The course is taught by Professor Bart Ehrman, who teaches biblical studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Those of you who attended our Tuesday afternoon study group several years ago may remember him from the New York Times’ bestseller, *Misquoting Jesus*.

I am aware that my continually drawing attention to what we are currently reading or viewing in our Sunday morning Bible study and our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group may strike you as an unabashed promotion of these two discussion groups and an unrelenting invitation for you to join us in the experience of an evolving faith journey. If you were to come to this conclusion, all I can say is: “You are correct.”

In *The Historical Jesus*, the first of the two sections of Dr. Ehrman’s course, he suggests that all biblical scholars approach their understanding of Jesus from some particular perspective. He suggests that they, like us, have an image or picture of Jesus, and that this forms the basis of their understanding of the man, his mission, and his message.

A common image of Jesus within our own religious tradition is the image of Jesus as savior. This image is a constellation of answers to the three basic questions about Jesus: Question #1: *Who was he?* Answer: He was the divinely begotten Son of God. Question #2: *What was his mission or purpose?* Answer: His mission or purpose was to die for the sins of the world. Question #3: *What was his message?* Answer: His message was about his identity as the Son of God, the saving purpose of his crucifixion, and the importance of believing in him.

There are also other images, other understandings. An example would be the image of Jesus as teacher. Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher. His mission or purpose was to lead people from the darkness of sin to God’s light. He taught about God, about the kingdom of God, and about how we should live. He taught us to share, to serve others. He taught us the Golden Rule.

We can certainly make a case for each of these images of Jesus, along with many others, e.g., Jesus as healer. Each of the two primary understandings of Jesus helps to shape our

understanding of the Christian life, the life we are called to live. The first view emphasizes the importance of belief. The second emphasizes the importance of being good, of living a good and moral life.

In our Sunday morning discussion of these as well as other perspectives or images of Jesus, we are coming to see the limitations of each of them. Each of them draws from certain passages of scripture and ignores or denies the importance of many others. Each of them seems to put Jesus into a box, a box that does not seem to do justice to the fullness, to the complexity of the man, his mission, and his message.

It goes without saying that we all have beliefs about Jesus. However, as important as our beliefs about Jesus and God are, they are not the end and goal of our religious faith. It goes without saying that it is important to lead a good life, a moral life. However, that is also not the end and goal of our religious faith. What, then is the essence of the Christian faith? What does it mean to be a Christian? In our attempt to answer these questions, we turn to the passage from Matthew's gospel that we heard this morning. When asked what is the first, the greatest commandment, Jesus responds,

'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.'*

Jesus tells us that the end and goal of our religious faith is our relationship with God. It is this to which Jesus calls us. As Christians, Jesus not only *shows* us the way to God, as the incarnation of God's Spirit in the realm of space and time, he *is* the Way. The man, the mission, and the message come together in a single teaching--the Way to God is love. You are to *love* God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and you are to *love* your neighbor as yourself.

The spiritual path to which Jesus calls us is not reducible to our holding an orthodox belief system, though our beliefs can be helpful by pointing us in the right direction. Note how Jesus never asks people what they believe; he never demands a declaration of belief. The spiritual path to which Jesus calls us is not reducible to living a good and moral life, a life without sin, as praiseworthy as this is. As we noted last week, Jesus praised the repentant tax collector over the righteous (and self-righteous) Pharisee.

The spiritual path to which Jesus calls us, the path that Jesus shows us, is the path of relationship. It is about loving God, *really* loving God. It is about loving Jesus, *really* loving Jesus. It is about taking on Jesus' mind and his heart. If we do this, we have no choice. We will

have to love our neighbor because Jesus loves our neighbor, our brothers and sisters, even if they are different from us. *And* we will have to love ourselves because Jesus loves us. This is why St. Augustine said, “Be a Christian and do whatever you want.” If we are *really* a Christian, only good, compassionate, healing words and actions will flow forth from us.

On communion Sundays, both in our prayer and through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we come into our Lord’s presence. We discover that we can talk with him as we would with our very best friend. We discover that he is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. As we talk with him, as we listen to him, as we open ourselves to his guidance, our relationship with him deepens. It is this that gives rise to a healed, to a transformed life.

As we heard again this morning, in his last meetings with his disciples, Jesus encourages them to think of him as a friend. This is at the core of Jesus, his mission, and his message. This is the heart of prayer. However, with some Christians, their faith does not seem to be grounded in their relationship with Jesus.

Several years ago, I saw a bumper sticker that read: “Christianity: It’s Not a Religion, It’s a Relationship.” Christianity calls, it invites us into a relationship with God as a loving parent. It calls, it invites us into a relationship with Jesus as a friend. It draws us into a relationship with God through Jesus the Christ. We can deepen and strengthen this relationship through prayer and through presence, just as we would with any relationship.

We can ignore or neglect our relationship with God, just as we can with any relationship. However, there is one difference, and it is an important difference. Although we can break off a relationship with another person, we *cannot* break off our relationship with God. No matter what we do or don’t do, if God is like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we cannot dissolve the relationship or even diminish God’s love for us. This is not to say that we cannot disappoint God by the way we live our lives or by our neglect of that relationship that forms the very ground of our being. Children can disappoint their parents by doing hurtful things, but they cannot break off the “love that will not let us go.”

I am deeply troubled by the suicide bombings that take place daily in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and this past week in Tunisia. Let us entertain the possibility that these acts of terrorism, the murders of innocent civilians, of women and children, are an expression of religious conviction and zeal. I’m sure that this is the way the suicide bomber sees it, and it is his religious beliefs, his belief in the rightness of the holy war that leads him to such an action.

What is the religious justification for the taking of innocent life? Here is where our image, our understanding of Jesus can guide us. If I were a Christian, before I engaged in such an action, I would try to place myself within the heart of God. I would try to take on Jesus' heart and mind. Then I would ask Jesus what he thought about such an undertaking.

From the Jesus I have come to know through scripture, through prayer, and through the relationship we have developed through the years, I know that he would never give his approval to such an action. The question then becomes: if I engage in such destructive actions, to whom would I be talking, if indeed I am talking to anyone at all? Have I made the mistake of substituting a religion for a relationship?

Religion has to do with the enduring structures of a faith. It has to do with history, scriptures, teachings, councils, theological perspectives, worship forms, church polity, and the institutional structures that support these religious practices. I think we can see from this list that it is possible to have a religion without a relationship. Indeed, as William James and Carl Jung have pointed out, we can have a religion not only *in place of* a relationship, but as a way of *defending against* a relationship, as a defense against primary religious experience. If religion becomes a substitute for a relationship, instead of providing tools for strengthening that relationship, it has missed the point of its existence.

Traditionally, Roman Catholics have grounded their beliefs in the Church councils and teachings, the catechism of the church. Protestants have traditionally grounded their beliefs in scripture, in the Bible. Both scripture and the teachings of the church can serve as important tools for understanding and deepening our relationship with God. Let us not, however, lose sight of the fact that it is not the church, not the Bible, and not the religion, but the relationship that should be at the heart of our faith.

Let me give you an example of this distinction. Many years ago, when I was working at a pastoral counseling center in Providence, a pastor referred a family to me for family therapy. The parents had just learned that their daughter, who was a senior in college, was homosexual and in a loving, committed relationship with a partner. The parents were shocked, though the daughter's younger sister was not.

The mother recovered quickly, as mothers tend to do. She told her daughter that they loved her, that they supported her, and that they would be welcoming to her partner. She insisted that they both come home for Thanksgiving. She also honestly confessed that she didn't

understand much about homosexuality and needed them to explain what it was all about, what might have caused it, what it felt like, and how she could be more supportive.

The father, on the basis of his religious beliefs, said that the daughter's partner would never be welcome in their house, and that the daughter could not come home until she repented of her sin and entered into a process to change her sexual orientation. The daughter, heartbroken, refused to do this. The father quoted scripture in support of his judgment of homosexuality. However, I noted in the sessions that he never mentioned Jesus.

When I asked the girl's father what Jesus had said to him about the way he was responding to his daughter, he first looked puzzled. Then he said that he didn't talk to Jesus. He didn't need to; he had his religious beliefs. When I suggested he might pray about it, he angrily replied that he didn't care what Jesus thought; scripture was clear that homosexuals cannot inherit the kingdom of God.

It struck me as strange for an avowed Christian to say, "I don't care what Jesus thinks about this matter." It seemed that the father had the religion but not the relationship. Given a choice between the two, I thought he picked the wrong one. He was faced with a choice between his religion and his daughter. I could not imagine that Jesus would tell him to keep his limited understanding of homosexuality and his limited understanding of scripture and throw away his daughter. If parenting, like Christianity, is about relationship, then both relationships need to evolve.

With regard to the matter of homosexuality, we can take our stand on the Council of Trent, the teachings of St. Augustine, or certain select passages of scripture. We could also talk with Jesus about it. Now it is possible that you might engage in prayer with Jesus and receive the message that Jesus would want you to condemn and disown your daughter, that he would want your church to exclude people of certain sexual orientations from Christian fellowship, but I would be both surprised and curious at the message you received. Surprised that Jesus would say this to you, and curious as to what kind of picture, image, or understanding of Jesus you have in your mind. I would be curious about the Jesus to whom you were praying.

Some time ago I watched a television special about a sociopathic pedophile who abused, raped, and killed many children. It was amazing how often this man had been released from prison or put on probation with no evidence of rehabilitation or even the desire to engage in treatment. As I watched, I felt the pain of the children, the despair and anger of the parents. Had I had the opportunity to pull the switch right then and send this man on to his "just rewards," I

would have done so without blinking an eye. If I talked with Jesus about it, however, I know he wouldn't approve. Jesus wouldn't want me to pull the switch, nor would he be impressed by my grasp of scripture, e.g., my invoking "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

To return to those who are responsible for suicide bombings, I don't understand their religion. I know their beliefs are a distortion of Islamic teaching, that their beliefs and actions are not characteristic of all Muslims, for I find a strong connection between Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, and the teachings of both Jesus and Buddha. The terrorists might have a religion, but I don't think they have a personal faith. If they do, if they view their religion as a relationship, with whom are they in relationship? They certainly aren't in relationship with the God who was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, for that God would never tell them to perpetrate such evil, no matter what the justification or the intended outcome.

As we continue our spiritual journey through Lent to Easter, a journey to discover Jesus, his mission, and his message, we should remember how Jesus told his disciples that he was their friend. What he was teaching them, what he was offering to them was not a religion, but a relationship. Once we realize this distinction, we can understand the purpose of religion and the purpose of our religion, with its many forms, structures, rituals, and beliefs. Religion should serve to strengthen that relationship. When it doesn't, it's not doing what it is supposed to do.

Also, if you ever find yourself having to choose between the two, I hope you remember which one is more important.

Let me give you a hint. It's the one that is grounded in love.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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