

LENT 2 - IT'S NOT A RELIGION; IT'S A RELATIONSHIP

(03/16/2025)

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)

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. Lent is the period of forty days and six Sundays that we set aside in preparation for Easter. In our worship this Lenten season, we are exploring some of Jesus’ teachings immediately preceding his crucifixion and resurrection. Along with Jesus and his disciples, we are, so to speak, journeying to Easter.

One of my favorite biblical scholars is Bart Ehrman, who teaches biblical studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I’m not positive, but isn’t that where Bill Belichick will be coaching for at least the next couple of years? But that’s not the point. We were talking about Bart Ehrman. Those of you who attended our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group several years ago may remember him from the New York Times’ bestseller, *Misquoting Jesus*, which we read.

I am aware that my continually drawing attention to what we are currently reading or viewing in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group may strike you as an unabashed promotion of this discussion group 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*, a series of lectures by Dr. Ehrman, 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 and power of his crucifixion, and the importance of believing in him.

As I mentioned, this is a commonly held image, a common understanding of who Jesus was, his mission or purpose, and his message. However, as we have discovered in our Tuesday

afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group (there I go again!), there are also other images, other understandings within our own religious tradition.

One example would be the image of Jesus as teacher, as a rabbi. From this perspective, his mission or purpose was to lead people from darkness to light. He taught us 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.

Another example, as we have learned from our studies this year of Peter Stilla's book *Naturally Miraculous*, would be to view Jesus as a mystic, as someone who experienced and then lived the deeper truth, the deeper reality, the divine Presence that underlies not only our beliefs and our faith, but our life and all that is. In his life and teaching, Jesus reveals this transcendent God to us and helps us build a deeper relationship with that God who creates and animates our lives.

Another example, another image of Jesus, one that speaks to me, is Jesus as healer. Jesus brought not only a healing message, a healing word to those who were suffering; he brought a healing presence. He made us aware of the healing power of God's presence in our lives and in our relationships. This image is a central focus of Christian Science. The existentialist philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard combines this and the image of teacher when he suggests that Jesus seeks to heal us from the despair of a meaningless life, from what Kierkegaard calls "the sickness unto death."

We can certainly make a case from scripture, particularly from the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, for each of these images of Jesus, along with many others. Each image, each understanding of Jesus is sort of like a puzzle piece. It is not that one of them is right and all the others are wrong. Each is part of a puzzle that we are trying to put together; each image, view, or perspective helps us understand Jesus, the spiritual practice that he taught and lived, the spiritual journey that the early church called the Way.

The image of Jesus as savior emphasizes the importance of belief. The image of Jesus as guide emphasizes the importance of enlightenment, of awakening. The image of Jesus as teacher emphasizes the importance of living a good and moral life. The realization that Jesus dwells with us and within us, in the depth of our souls, makes us aware that God is always working within us as a healing power in our lives and, through us, as a healing power in the world.

If we explore these popular images as well as other perspectives or understandings, we become aware of both the strengths and the limitations of each of them. Note that 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. If we didn't have beliefs about Jesus, we probably wouldn't be here this morning or reading this sermon online. 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.

In this passage, in this teaching, Jesus tells us that the end and goal of our religious faith is our relationship with God. It is this to which he calls us. As Christians, Jesus not only *teaches* us the way to God; he 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 in himself as the Messiah, as the eternal Christ, the Logos, the Word of God. The spiritual path to which Jesus calls us is also not reducible to living a good and moral life, a life without sin, as praiseworthy as this would be. 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 *becoming one* with Jesus by taking on his mind and his heart. If we do this, we have no choice. We will have to love our neighbor because Jesus not only *loves* our neighbor, our brother or sister, even if our brother or sister is different from us, Jesus *is* our brother or sister. *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* Christian, only good, compassionate, healing words and actions will flow forth from us.

On communion Sundays, in our prayer and through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we come into our Lord's presence. We sit around the table with him as the disciples did of old. We 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. He does not want to be regarded by his followers as something or someone to be worshipped. He wants them to experience him as a living presence within them. 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.

As Christians, 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, which was one of Jesus' central teachings, 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 what the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich calls "the Ground of Our Being." Children can disappoint their parents by doing hurtful things, but they cannot break what our beloved hymn calls the "love that will not let us go."

I am deeply troubled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, by Hamas' determination to wipe Israel off the map, by Israel's heartless massacre of fifty thousand Palestinians to take control of that piece of land that we know as Gaza. I am deeply troubled by the atrocities, the mass rape of women and little girls by the rebel groups in the civil war in Congo. I am deeply troubled by the lack of compassion in our own country for refugee families, for individuals who identify as LGBTQ, for people who are dying of starvation around the world because we have cut off aid to them. I am also deeply troubled by the realization that many of those who engage in these acts or hold these views would identify themselves as religious, would perhaps even identify themselves as Christian.

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 actions. The question then becomes: if I engage in such destructive actions, to whom am I talking, if indeed I am talking to anyone at all? Have I made the mistake of substituting a religion for a relationship? Have I institutionalized my religion, turned it into an identity instead of a relationship, a spiritual path?

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 the kind of primary religious experience that would turn our life upside down. If religion becomes a substitute for a relationship, instead of providing tools for strengthening that relationship, it misses the point of its existence. When this happens, I shed no tears over its death.

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 serving 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, that she 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, who was a regular church goer and active in his church, 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." Doesn't that seem strange to you? It seemed to me that the father had the religion but not the relationship. Given a choice between the two, I thought he picked the wrong one. Because he had 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 primitive understanding of homosexuality, of sexual orientation, of the complexities of gender identity, and also 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. I would be surprised that Jesus would say this to you, and I would be 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.

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. And when it doesn't do what it is supposed to do, it often turns demonic. When this happens, I shed no tears over its death.

Also, if you ever find yourself having to choose between the two, between religion and relationship, 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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