

Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale  
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00:00  
The Hinge  
Psalm 90  
Matthew 22:34-46

“A lawyer went up to Jesus and asked him a question to test him.” Imagine Jesus sitting in the temple. The Sadducees had already been bested by Jesus this week. They were off licking their wounds after he blew apart their attempt at trapping him with the story about the afterlife. So they’ve departed the scene.

Now the Pharisees take their turn and put forth their best expert, a lawyer, someone who had trained for many years to know the Torah, the Jewish laws, inside and out. He was a subject matter expert and was here to “test” Jesus.

Actually the word in Greek really is much more like to “tempt” Jesus the same way the Devil did when he was out in the wilderness. The difference being that you test someone hoping they will pass. You “tempt” them hoping they will fail.

So here is the question: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

This was a trick question, as were most questions the religious leaders posed Jesus. Rabbis constantly argued about this question and there were various schools of thought on different positions. No matter what Jesus answered, he was bound to offend someone. This was not just about holding up one of the Ten Commandments either. No, the lawyer is asking him about all the commandments in the law. Do you know how many there were?

There were 613 of them. The greater part, the slight majority or about 350 of them, were “thou shalt nots” and the rest were “thou shalls.” Which of the 613 was the most important? What will Jesus say?

Jesus answers. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul and mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.”

You know, on weeks like this, when I despair at yet another mass shooting, and then another, and I go to the beach only to find it clotted with unseasonable algae likely from climate change, and I feel like it is all such a mess....I go out at night and look at the stars.

I think about how we live here on the planet earth and all the other heavenly bodies up there, out there: the sun, the planets, the other local stars and then to other further stars, nebulae and other galaxies. The light that we see as we look at certain stars being so old that it left those stars thousands of years ago so that in truth we were looking at history.

I envision the great Milky Way galaxy, our galactic home, slowly rotating. As you know the Milky Way has these great spiral arms. And we are circling a rather ho-hum plain star on the middle lower edge of one of the rotating arms.

I have loved astronomy for a long time I stand outside overwhelmed by the very magnitude of what I see. We, who sometimes think we are everything, are in truth a tiny speck in the midst of this galaxy. And that is only one galaxy out of the millions of other ones out there.

It gives you a cosmic perspective doesn't it, which I believe is a good thing.

A cosmic perspective. What this means is that in the scheme of things we are but a bit of dust, a flash in the span of time. Not just our individual lives, but even our planet's life. Even our star, our sun's life is so very small. As the psalmist writes, grass that flourishes then withers and dies. A sum of 70 or 80 years and then it ends, we end. Even our planet is a blink in the unimaginable reach of cosmic time.

That means that no matter what happens here, it does not really impact the rest of the universe. We can blow this whole planet up, end it in nuclear annihilation or pollute it past saving, and the universe goes on. Stars are born and die. Planets spin to life and the giant Milky Way galaxy continues on, its arms slowly rotating in space.

This might seem shocking and dismal to you rather than uplifting. How can you be so blasé. Don't you care, Karen? And this idea can be quite harmful. This idea has been used by the anti environmental movement—the earth doesn't really matter so why not use it up? All species will die eventually so what does it matter if we lose a dozen or a thousand here and there every year. No big deal.

Some conservative Christians see this perspective as a confirmation of their belief in the Second Coming. Why worry about nuclear annihilation? If the world ends Jesus will come and save us. Jesus will take us home to heaven. In fact, let's degrade the place a little faster so we won't have to wait so long.

But for me this cosmic perspective speaks of something else. It gives me an anchor, a pole star like the North Star, around which everything else rotates.

No matter what happens, God exists and will still exist.  
No matter if creation lives or dies on this planet, God is and will be.  
No matter what destruction, disease, grief, annihilation or death, God. God is there.  
God at the first. God at the last.

Seeing the cosmic perspective creates in me a certainty of a God so much larger and more powerful and uncontainable.

It is in many ways a relief that no matter how badly we mess up this world, or I mess up personally, we cannot destroy the whole fabric of creation. It is a relief to me when it seems like no matter what we do we can't seem to stem the tide of inhumane, disastrous practices, that ultimately, cosmically all will be ok. God is. This keeps me from getting lost in the struggle; it keeps me from losing sight of what is important.

It is one side of the hinge.

Think of doors that you pass. Doors in this sanctuary or doors in your home. Two pieces make up the body of a hinge. The one side of the hinge is bolted into the wall and it is fixed and it is steady and it is sure. Looking at that fixed side I hear Jesus' words about the first and greatest commandment. "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." This commandment is the side of the hinge that is on the wall. Fixed. Steady. Sure. Unmoving.

With this cosmic perspective I can see that God is the only thing, the only force, the only being, the only anything for which I can hang everything on. It is the center of our total cosmic existence and perhaps the center of our personal belief, too. There is nothing else that can stand up and be that side of the hinge. So one side of the hinge of faith rests in the ultimate,

the eternal. That gives me a sense of awe and hope that reflects I think the “peace that passes all understanding.” The peace that is anchored in God.

But in our Matthew text today, Jesus goes on. He could have quit while he was ahead. No one would have disputed his choice of commandment. It was an airtight answer. He had already won the battle with the lawyer despite the fact that if you notice Jesus actually misquoted the commandment. The original text from Deuteronomy says to “love God with heart, soul and might.” Jesus says to love with heart, soul and mind.

But maybe that wasn’t such a misquote. To love God with all our mind is a very different thing than loving God with all our might. Might means strength of body. Might means physicality. Might makes right has been used for many an argument. Might is the domain of the powerful, those in advantageous positions. Might does not usually include those who are less able, those who are physically not strong, those who are not in positions of power or privilege. We have seen throughout our history what it means when believers believe with all their might. Religious wars, crusades, have been fought out with the mightiness of belief.

But Jesus continues: “and a second commandment is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

[Now we are reading from Matthew’s gospel today. In Luke’s gospel the story goes on as the lawyer asks a second question, “well who is my neighbor?” and Jesus continues with the parable of the Good Samaritan. That way everyone would be very clear about who their neighbor is.

In Matthew’s gospel the story continues with a dispute about Jesus’ authority circling around who calls whom Lord.]

Jesus said the second and note, equally important commandment, is to “love thy neighbor as yourself.” We have probably all heard this a million times before. It feels like for many liberal Christians it is the way forward. It gives us the light to see faith by the force for our actions. We can also see that many of our friends and neighbors who aren’t in a faith based community follow this as well. How many of us have humanist neighbors and friends who don’t believe in God but believe in doing good things? They are out there helping, healing, holding, and loving neighbor as self. They live this commandment.

Here at Pilgrim we care for one another, we send money for wells in Cambodia, we make space for folks trying to change the world with gun reform and speaking out against hate-based ballot initiatives. We put in doors that make the church more accessible.

And that is the other part of the hinge, the part that is affixed to the door, the part that swings open, the part that moves. This is the part that is about mission and vision that will come into even sharper focus as you work together with a settled pastor.

To have a rich, faith life, we need both parts of the hinge, both individually and as a congregation.

For if we neglect or skip over the part of loving God with all our heart, soul and mind, we flap in the wind, our door moves back and forth willy-nilly as we struggle to love neighbor as self but we have nothing in which to ground ourselves. That is why Jesus says loving God is first, the first and greatest commandment. It is anchored in that unmoving strength and cosmic permanence that we are able to take risks, to know ultimately, and I mean ultimately, everything will be ok. God is God.

But it is equally true that without the second commandment, loving one's neighbor, truly doing the work we are called to do, that the first commandment is just a lifeless saying.

If we say we love God but do nothing for our neighbor in need, if we do nothing to reach out, then loving God becomes meaningless. All the law and prophets hang on this, says Jesus. And he is right. To love the stranger, shelter the homeless and refugees, forgive and make amends, challenge the inequity of laws, all of that can be found over and over and over again in the Law and words of the prophets.

And the religious leaders challenging Jesus know it. Do we know it?

Today I would encourage you today to look at hinges--front door hinges, car door hinges, cabinet hinges--hinges are everywhere once you look for them. Think about, within yourself, where is the half of the hinge where you are loving God beyond all other things? And where is the second half where you struggle to love neighbor as self. How do these come together to make our faith, your faith, and mine, and ours together. From cosmic dust to the dusty work of justice seeking, "O God, prosper the work of our hands. O prosper the work of our hands."

Amen.