

OUR FAITH IN ONE SENTENCE

Psalm 90
Matthew 22:34-46

Faith Community
October 23, 2005

Introduction

In almost every area of life, you find one sentence that can sum up that field. I remember, in my freshman year in high school, someone came to talk to us about computers. That was before anyone ever heard of computers. He said, “Basically computers add one and one as fast as lightning.” That stuck with me even though I had no idea how computers worked. Actually, I still have no idea!

Remember a few years ago someone came out with a book titled, All I Really Needed To Know I Learned In Kindergarten? It was a runaway bestseller because it summarized what’s most important in life in lessons we all learned in kindergarten. The author, Robert Fulgrum, wrote in the beginning of the book, “Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand box at nursery school. These are the things I learned – share everything, play fair, clean up after yourself, don’t take things that aren’t yours, say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody”

Statements like that remind us that although we get tangled in the complexities of life, at heart, it is fairly simple. In our scripture reading today Jesus summarizes our faith for us in one sentence.

I

The context of Jesus’ statement is entrapment. Apparently, some religious leaders were trying to get him to say something they could use against him. On the surface you don’t see it. What could be tricky about asking which commandment is the greatest? Sounds like a good question. We’d all like the answer to that one.

Many religious leaders believed that all of the commandments were equally important. They had 613 commandments (248 positive ones for the number of parts they thought were in the body; and 365 negative ones for the number of days in the year). They felt that none of these laws were more important than the others.

But they didn’t ask, “Do you feel all laws are equal, or do you think some are more important than others?” Instead, the question is phrased in a tricky way, “Which commandment is the greatest?” They are trying to get something on him so they can use it against him.

Jesus isn’t afraid of their question, and he answers them directly. “The first is: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He not only gave them the most important, but the second most important as well.

II

As we look at those two commandments, they are really inseparable. If we really love our God, it leads to loving our neighbor. How well we love those around us is a sign of how well we love God. We all know people who talk well about their religion – maybe they wear Jesus on

their sleeve – but when it comes to treating people fairly, their actions betray their words.

Love for the people around us is the step that moves our faith from words to actions. Maybe I John says it best, “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment is this: those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters.”

In the early church, the things Christians were known for was their caring for each other. One of the comments made about Christians was, “See how they love each other.” Their beliefs were translated into loving action.

Saint Augustine once said, “Love the Lord and do as you please.” He meant that when we really love the Lord, we want to do what will please him. Our love and commitment to God will make us want to do God’s will – caring for other people, forgiving, being fair to people, especially people who are less able to look out for themselves.

III

Jesus says that not only are these two the most important commandments, but all the law and the prophets hang on them. The phrase “Law and prophets” means everything: all the rules, actions, and teachings. Our whole faith hangs on these commandments.

They are not only a summary of our faith; they are the heart of our faith. If someone asks you to tell what Christianity teaches in one sentence, you can say, “Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Everything else is commentary.

Conclusion

When former president Jimmy Carter ran for Governor of Georgia and lost to the avid racist, Lester Maddox, he was devastated. His sister, Ruth, who was a Christian evangelist, suggested that he get away from politics for a while and do something completely different. He took her advice and went with a mission team to do evangelism in Springfield, Massachusetts.

He was teamed up with a pastor named Eloy Cruz. Together they went among the Puerto Rican poor, who lived in almost abandoned tenement buildings, witnessing to Christ. Carter was amazed at how well people responded to Rev Cruz. He was a remarkable man who seemed to know just the right thing to say, and someone who people warmed up to immediately.

At the end of the week, Carter asked Cruz what made him so gentle and effective as a Christian witness. Cruz was surprised and embarrassed that someone thought this of him. He thought for a moment and then he responded that Christ himself was always gentle, especially with those who were poor and weak.

Then he said, “You only have to have two loves in your life – love for God, and love for the person in front of you at any particular time.”

Love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love the person in front of you. Everything in our faith depends on that.

Amen