

*Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 23.x.2005, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Chanceford Twp., York Co., Pennsylvania
LBW 2 Ante-Communion Service
Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18; Psalm 1; I Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46*

J. J.!

Grace to you and peace, from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two Commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

—Matthew 22:37-40

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A little explication is in order to begin with in order for us to understand exactly what is going on in today's Gospel. The Pharisees, the genuinely pious and zealously innovative predecessors of the Rabbis, are delighted to hear that Jesus had sent the Sadducees away with their tails between their legs. If you brought your Bible with you, you can look this up in Matthew 22, beginning at verse 23. The Pharisees believed in a personal resurrection to judgment or paradise, and they believed that God's Anointed, was coming soon, any day now, to bring about the end of foreign rule and to restore the Kingdom of Israel to the descendant of King David.

The Sadducees believed in none of this, at least not literally. They represented the learned, culturally refined and very traditionalist wing of Judaism and the oldest of the old ruling families of Israel. They looked upon the Pharisee movement, and movements like those led by John the Baptist, in somewhat the same way a High Church Episcopalian might regard fire-and-brimstone Fundamentalists or the Christian Snake-Handler Sects of Kentucky, and the feeling was mutual. The Sadducees did not accept the late Jewish belief in a personal resurrection. Instead, they held to the belief enunciated over and over again in the Psalms that the Name of the **LORD** and His Word will endure forever, that also the *People* of the **LORD** will endure forever, but not necessarily individuals as such. That belief, which seemed to the Sadducees like a preoccupation with the dead, was considered 'Egyptian' in early Israel after the Exodus.

Since the Babylonian Captivity under King Nebudkanezzar, many Jews had come to believe in a personal fulfillment of God's plan in the mysterious 'Son of Man' first mentioned in Daniel 3:25, but the Sadducees were cautious about this new belief, were skeptical about a personal Messiah, and they did not expect the fulfillment of God's plan for history anytime soon. For them, the Messianic hope was not literal but allegorical, the belief that God would fulfill His purpose for the world

and His People somehow, sometime, but probably neither tomorrow nor the day after.

So, suspecting Him of being just another Pharisee, the Sadducees posed a silly question to Jesus about the personal resurrection of the dead after this life, one that was supposed to logically confound any Pharisee simpleton. But it was Jesus Who sent the Sadducees away, tied up in mental knots, just as He did to the Pharisees and Herodians in last Sunday's Gospel.

So now, the Pharisees were thinking to themselves, "Maybe this Jesus isn't half bad! Look how he refuted the Herodians [and some of us] and now the *Sadducees!* And Jesus would have risen even higher in their eyes when He answered the question posed in today's Gospel by a recognized scholar of Sacred Scripture. That is what 'lawyer' means in this text, a Bible scholar, a sort of theologian. Jesus gives the same answer any number of Rabbis of His time or after gave to this question, a standard Rabbinical question, 'What is the greatest of the Commandments?' Jesus was not the first and He was not the last to answer with the so-called 'Double Love Commandment' which combines Deuteronomy 6:5: "*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,*" and Leviticus 19:18 as we heard in today's First

Reading: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*. I am the LORD.” When He says the ‘the Law and the Prophets’ depend on these two precepts, Jesus means the whole Scripture, God’s whole revelation and will revealed in the Bible. The Rabbis were often asked to locate one or two verses of Scripture that would sum up the essential meaning of the whole Old Testament, just as John 3:16 could be said to sum up the meaning of the whole New Testament. Even though Jesus substitutes ‘mind’ for ‘strength,’ He is giving the standard, expected, and safe Rabbinical answer to this standard Rabbinical question. In so doing, He must have risen in the estimation of His hearers. Everything Jesus says seems to check out. He is one of them. Just as happened in Jesus’ home congregation in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:22), they must have thought and spoken well of Him. He was, after all, the enemy of their enemies, the Sadducees. That meant He was one of them . . . probably. The Pharisees felt affirmed in their own rightness and pleased with this well-spoken young teacher in Israel.

But then, just when the Pharisees think they have figured Jesus out, just when they are comfortable with Him, just when they are even beginning to *like* Him, and just when He had them audience ‘eating out of

His hand,' so to speak, Jesus turns everything upside down. He poses His *own* mind-bender of a question to *them*. The text is the 110th Psalm, verse 1: "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" In the standard scroll texts of the Psalter, Psalm CX bears the heading, *Mashall v'David* (= 'a Psalm of David'), so the speaker in the Psalm, except where there is a quotation, is supposed to be King David. Now, the problem is—unless someone else is writing this Psalm *about* King David, *to and for* King David, as was probably the case—there one too many 'Lords' in this verse, something the Pharisees had obviously never thought about until now.

Jesus knew very well that the Messiah was expected to be the descendant of King David, He knew that some were beginning to expect that of *Him*, but in the sense that the Messiah, the Christ, God's Anointed would simply restore what had been before, as great as King David but no greater. Jesus *is*, in fact, descended from David and is even born in Bethlehem, the 'City of David,' according to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Jesus Himself hears others apply the title, 'Son of David,' without acknowledging it. But Our Lord knows that the Pharisees are looking for and praying for another David, descended from David, to take the throne of Israel away from the Gentile overlords.

Quoting Psalm 110, Jesus' question we hear in today's Gospel. It could be paraphrased in this way: "In this Psalm of David, my Pharisee friends, we hear the Psalmist, David, referring to two different personages. First, there is 'the LORD'--the Almighty, the Holy One, blessed be He! But then, David says that the Holy One speaks to '*my* Lord.' Now, Who can that be but Messiah, the One Who is to come, and is not *David*, then saying that he is *less* than Messiah, that Messiah is *greater* than David?" Jesus question seems to imply another question to His hearers. Again, this is my paraphrase: "Ought not we expect and pray for One Who is *greater* than David, *greater* than all our learning and expectations up to now, One Who is coming and Who . . . is already here?"

No wonder the Evangelist writes: "No one was able to give Him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask Him any more questions" (v. 46). The same experience awaits us each time we pose a question to the LORD, whether in prayer or in our study of God's Word in Scripture—we will *always* be questioned, more than we question, forced to think, to probe and to plumb the depths of our own thought, belief and faith more than we had intended.

Perhaps that is why Jesus substitutes the word 'mind' for the word 'strength' in his quotation from Deuteronomy: "You shall love the LORD

your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your *mind*." It is not only through the power of hearing, which belongs to the strength of the body, but through the *mind* that a question can be posed to us, that we can understand that question, that we can *be* questioned. God *questions* us in His Commandments, especially as they are summed up in these the two verses Jesus cites from the Old Testament. What is it to be completely devoted to God from the core of our being. What is it to love my neighbor, my fellow human being with *that* consecrated love? *Do* I love in that way? Have I *ever* loved in that way? Does God the Holy Spirit find that love in me *now*? Will Almighty God Our Judge find that love in me on at my last hour, or in *any* of us at the end and fulfillment of all things?

Your only hope, and mine, is to hear that question without turning away, looking instead to the right hand of the Holy One Who asks it of us, into the eyes of the One in Whom that love was and is perfect, now, and at the hour of our death, now, when we are called to serve, then, when we are permitted to lay down the vocation of this life and to take up the call of the life to come. This question may bewilder us, as it did those who first heard Our Savior speak in their visible presence, but it must not terrify us or discourage us. I know of a beautiful Christian soul who has

helped hundreds through wise counsel as they come to her with the problems of a life twisted or broken in purpose. Before each day of her work, she offers a prayer for strength and wisdom beginning with the words of this 'Double Love Commandment' from Matthew 22:37&39, praying to serve God by seeing Christ in the need of those who come to her. The Holy Spirit has answered that prayer again and again with the grace of *empathy*, the ability to hear and to feel the other's pain as one's own.

That grace of devotedly loving the neighbor as one devoutly and repeatedly consecrates one's own self to God clearly characterizes some people, but not all. If we hear God's question to us, I and most of us cannot answer it because of our sins and because of our always imperfect love. But if we turn to Christ to answer for us, we will find Him not only at the Father's right hand in glory, but also where we might never have expected to see Him, at our side, in the neighbor in need.

For each of us, in each instant, these two foundations of the whole Word of God will mean something different. To our service men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan, the total love of the Triune God in a country that considers most of them 'infidels' must not be easy. And their neighbor includes not only their comrades and allies, but also us, on

whose behalf they serve, the American people who do not always show their gratitude to those in uniform. 'The neighbor' includes also the civilians among whom they must move and for whose sake they risk their lives, but also the often unseen enemy who is there to kill them and to destroy all the good they are attempting to do. At home and in the workplace, as citizens of a country at war and as citizens of a country and a world rent asunder by natural and man-made catastrophes, as men and women who are also tempted to love and to serve anything and anyone *but* the unseen God and His purpose in this world, these two great Commandments question us and probe us. But the one who brings them to our attention again and again through His Word and in His Church is He Who took on this life for our sake. He is the One Who does indeed confront us, not to shame us, but to wake us up, to save us, to guide us in His footsteps to a better way, to newness of life both now and forever. ✠
Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to our God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

S. D. G.!