

“The Labor of Love”

“Ask a stupid question,” the saying goes, “...and you’ll get a stupid answer.” Lawyers are masters at asking questions, but sometimes in the pursuit of making a case, the questions are rather ridiculous. Consider these lawyer questions that appear in court records:

- ***Do you have any children or anything of that kind?***
- ***So, you were gone until you returned?***
- ***You don't know what it was, and you didn't know what it looked like, but can you describe it?***
- ***Q: Have you lived in this town all your life?***
A: Not yet.
- ***Q: “Do you recall approximately the time that you examined the body of
Mr. Huntington at St. Mary's Hospital?”***
A: “The autopsy began at 5:30 P.M.”
Q: “And Mr. Huntington was dead at the time, is that correct?”
***A: “No, he was sitting on the table wondering why I was performing an
autopsy on him!”***
- ***A Texas attorney, realizing he was on the verge of unleashing a dumb question, interrupted himself and said,
“Your Honor, I'd like to strike the next question.”***

In today's text, Jesus is again in the crosshairs of the Pharisees. Earlier in chapter 22, the Herodians tried to entrap Jesus by asking if it was lawful or not to pay taxes to Caesar. His answer left them speechless and sent them on their way.

The Sadducees were next, questioning Jesus about levirate marriage. "Suppose a man dies with no children. His brother marries the wife to have children for his brother. But he dies without fathering children, so another brother marries her, but he dies before a son comes. In the end, she marries all seven brothers. At the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" It was an ironic question since the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection, and Matthew says that Jesus' reply *astonished* them.

The Pharisees learned the Sadducee strategy had failed, so they devised a clever question, and picked the best person to ask it -- a lawyer! It was Johnny Cochran, I think. He asked Jesus, "I have a question, Teacher. Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" What a stupid question! It is like asking Emeril Lagasse if he can boil water, or asking Michael Phelps if he can tread water.

At the beginning and end of each day, Jewish children and adults recited Deuteronomy 6:5, which is called the Shema. Shema means to "hear" or "listen." *"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."*

Jesus simply reiterated what the Pharisees already knew and earnestly tried to practice themselves. Jesus cut to the core of the Law to reveal the heart of the scriptures and the foundation of our relationship with God and the world. If beliefs and doctrines and theological perspectives have no clear connection to the love of God and neighbor, they are of little use.

Abraham Lincoln was a Christian, but he was frequently criticized for not attending church. In those days, the churches placed great emphasis upon defending the fine points of church doctrine and correct belief. Responding to his critics, Lincoln

said: **“When any church will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification for membership the Savior’s condensed statement of the substance of both the law and the Gospel, ‘*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself*’ -- that church will I join with all my heart and soul.”**

Hear, O Creekside -- you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength. For this we were born. For this we are a church, to love God-- completely, whole-heartedly, exclusively. The question is this, **“Do you love God with everything that loving God requires?”**

- ❑ **Do you love God more than your house and the stuff in it?**
- ❑ **Do you love God more than your spouse and kids?**
- ❑ **Do you love God more than your reputation?**
- ❑ **Do you love God more than your hobbies or your dreams for the future?**
- ❑ **Do you love God more than you ideas about God?**
- ❑ **Do you love God more than life itself?**

What about it? Do you love God? It depends on what you mean by love. It is a ragged and threadbare word. It’s applied to all sorts of things. But the love of life, and the love of family, and the love of work, and the love of pleasure, and the love of music, and the love of country and the love of God *is not the same love*. It is tossed around so much in our culture, love doesn’t mean anything and it has diluted our understanding of what it means to love God.

The way some people talk, the love of God is an emotion. Loving God is something we feel. Loving God is soft, sentimental, and warm. If you told a Hebrew of Jesus’ day that loving the Lord is a feeling, he wouldn’t know what you were talking about. Loving God is not some vague, interior emotional state. If you love God you “do” something about it.

Jesus saw the Law very differently than the experts. The Pharisees saw rules and regulations. “Thou shalt and thou shalt not.” “Do this, and whatever you do, don’t do that!” Jesus saw

the Law as the Law of Love. Jesus demonstrated that it was all about loving God and neighbor and not being uptight about “stepping on cracks in the legal sidewalk.”

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The Law and Jesus commanded it. But it begs a question. Can love be commanded? I can only speak for myself, but I have not had much luck when it comes to loving by force. No matter the source of the force, be it from God or me, I’ve not succeeded in loving anyone I’ve *tried* to love.

There once was a king who created terror in his subjects. When he came from his palace to walk the streets of the village the people fled. One day a man was walking down the street when he saw the king coming the opposite way. There was no place to run, so he ducked inside a dark doorway hoping the King would pass without seeing him, but he was not so lucky.

“Why are you crouched in this doorway?” “Not reason at all, your majesty.” “Nonsense,” the King said. “You’re hiding. What are you hiding from?” “I’m hiding from you, your Majesty.” “Why would you hide from me?” “Because I’m afraid of your Majesty, your Majesty.” “Afraid? How dare you be afraid of me? I’m your King, you sniveling little peasant. You’re supposed to love me.” And the King took off a glove and beat the poor man with it. “Love me you miserable wretch. I demand that you love me!”

Loving under compulsion won’t happen.

Today is Reformation Sunday, an important day if you are Lutheran. For years Martin Luther lived in terror of God. He tried everything to make himself acceptable, and failed. Then came a revelation. We cannot do what God requires. None of us, not one can keep God’s commandments. We will not be saved by what we do. We are saved by what God’s grace does for us and the Holy Spirit does through us.

Loving God isn’t a feeling. Loving God cannot be forced. But what about loving our neighbor, and who *is* the neighbor we love? Notice that Jesus didn’t provide exceptions? “Love

everyone... except Muslims, atheists, liberals, gay people, Joe Six Pack, Joe the plumber, sloppy Joe, or you fill-in-the blank.” Jesus didn’t mention anyone who’s not a neighbor. Everyone qualifies.

I recently attended a conference at Calvin Seminary led by the distinguished preacher, Tom Long. He told the story of what happened at the Presbyterian Church in Atlanta where he belongs. The church has a ministry to people called “service resistant.” They are street people who would never walk into a church to worship, so the church goes out to them. They establish relationships with the men and women; help with their physical needs, and worship with them on street corners.

One day, one of the ministers mentioned the Ash Wednesday service. “Why do you come down to our church at noon on Wednesday and join us?” It sounded interesting -- interesting enough to spread the word to their friends. On Ash Wednesday the pastor entered the chapel and saw 75 homeless people in the pews.

Across the street from the church is the Georgia Legislature. A state senator called and asked if there would be room for the legislators to attend the service. Five minutes before worship began, 40 immaculately dressed legislators entered the chapel.

A wondrous thing happened. When it came time for the imposition of ashes, street people made the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the powerful and privileged. The legislators made the sign of the cross on the foreheads of people who had no power and narry a nickel to their name. They reminded each other that the only sure thing in life is God, and that not even in service to God are we safe from what life throws at us. Tom Long said that those assembled in that chapel were given a foretaste of life in the Kingdom of God.

There is a tribe in Africa that practices a ritual when a woman becomes pregnant. She goes into the wilderness with her female friends. There, they pray and meditate until they can hear it-- *the*

song of the child. They believe that every soul enters the world with a song unique to its personality and purpose. After the women learn the song, they sing to the mother's womb. When they return to the village they teach everyone else.

When birth comes, the community gathers to sing the to the baby. When the day comes to start school, the community gathers to sing the song. When it is time for initiation into adulthood, the community sings the song. When it is time for marriage, the community gathers to sing the man's and woman's song.

If necessary, they sing on another occasion. If someone causes pain or commits a crime, they are taken to the village center and encircled by the community for correction. They do not believe in punishment as a remedy. Correction happens through love. Correction requires remembering the true identity, so they sing the song to help those who stray remember who they are. When you know your song, there is no desire to hurt people.

And when the time comes to leave the world, the people gather at the bed as they did at the birth to sing the soul into the next life.

We come on Sunday to hear "our" song. If you don't come, you risk forgetting who you are. Whatever you do, don't forget how the song goes. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself."*

Love is as love does. Love God in worship and prayer. Love your family and your church family. Lend a hurting person your ear and heart, and then a meal in your home. Love God by offering hospitality to the stranger and befriending them for Jesus' sake. Love God by standing up for the poor and speaking

the truth to power with your vote. Get less. Give more -- your energies, your time, your finances.

So how shall you love God? With everything you've got!