



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity St. Matthew 22:34-46

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Who is Jesus? It's important. It's why we have the creeds that put so much emphasis on who Jesus is. Because if you get Jesus wrong, you won't get anything else right. Someone knocks on your door and wants to start talking theology and it sounds weird. Ask them who Jesus is and you'll immediately get to the root of everything. Ah! Mormon...or Jehovah's Witness. What they say about Jesus lays everything bare. The last few days I've been watching videos from a conference that's held annually down in Oregon. I've wondered whatever happened to all the big-name people from the Emergent Church movement of fifteen to twenty years ago. This week I found out. They've moved on from just kind of being theology sketchy to holding annual conferences and seminars to help people deconstruct their faith—which is just the new, trendy way to talk about apostasy. And in what I listened to, it was all about Jesus. Except it wasn't the Jesus revealed in scripture. It was *part* of the Jesus revealed in scripture. It was the warm-fuzzy Jesus. But they've left out the Jesus who called people to repentance, the Jesus who talked about sin and judgement, the Jesus who stands alone and apart and above every other god and king. They've built a false religion around a false Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, it's imperative that we get Jesus right. Christians have known this since the beginning. Again, it's why we have the creeds. Faith itself doesn't save. Faith itself doesn't forgive sins. Faith itself won't set the world to rights. It's the object of our faith who

forgives sins and saves us from death and fills us with God's Spirit and promises we'll be raised to new life as he has been.

As the Gospels reach their climax with the crucifixion of Jesus, they bring this to the forefront. Who is Jesus? That's what's going on in our Gospel today from Matthew 22. All these last months our Gospels have been from early in Jesus' ministry, but today we jump almost to the end and to two questions. The first is about the law—asked by the Pharisees. “Which is the most important commandment?” And Jesus gave the right answer and left them fuming and with no grounds on which to challenge him. At the same time, his answer was so correct that it left them and everyone there utterly challenged. And then Jesus turned the tables and asks them a question: “Is the Messiah David's son or David's lord?” “Or is he both?” And you can just picture them totally flabbergasted. No one had ever even thought to ask that question. They had no idea how to answer even though the answer—Jesus—was standing right there in the middle of them.

And that was the end of Jesus' confrontations with the leaders of the Jews. The next time he'll see them is when they have him arrested in the garden and then when they drag him before the Jewish council to make their accusations, and later as he hangs on the cross while they laugh and insult him. But hanging over those three scenes, will be the knowledge that Jesus knows the answers to these two all-important questions and that they do not. The very basis of their charges against him hangs on the answers to these two questions that they can't even begin to answer. And Jesus wants them to know (and Matthew wants us to know) that it is precisely in his arrest and trial and crucifixion that Jesus is fulfilling the two great commandments of the law. And it's precisely in his arrest, his trial, and his crucifixion that Jesus is taking his throne as Lord—as the King of the Jews and as David's lord. This

is who Jesus is and this is how he's come to rescue his people—from their sins, from death, and to bring them into God's new world.

So that first question. This is Matthew 7:34. Matthew writes, “When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they got together as a group. One of them, a lawyer, put him on the spot with a question: ‘Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law?’”

The Lord gave Moses 613 commandments and everyone knew which was the most important. It was so important that it had become Israel's “creed” and part of their daily prayer. (It still is today.) Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” And it goes on, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” It wasn't just something you did. The fact that it was every observant Jew's daily prayer meant that it was deeper than just doing. Loving God was supposed to be something that made its way deep, into your very being. It was a heart thing.

But the big question is: Did this all-consuming love for God really capture Israel's heart? The Pharisees, of all the people in Israel, knew that it hadn't. They, of all people, not only knew the struggle personally, they knew how Israel on the whole had failed and failed and failed. That was their “thing”. They knew that Israel was still basically in exile despite having returned from Babylon five hundred years before. The Lord's presence had never returned to the temple. Pagans still ruled them. And no one had heard the Lord's voice in centuries. And the Pharisees knew it was because God's people hadn't kept his law, because they hadn't loved him with all their being.

Jesus knew this too. A big part of his teaching—think of the Sermon on the Mount or we could go back to

Matthew 15 where Jesus talked about cups that are outwardly clean, but filthy on the inside—a big part of Jesus teaching was that Israel was desperately in need of a renewal of her *heart*. Outward keeping of the law? Awesome! Keep it up. But what God's most concerned about is a keeping of the law—of a love for God and a love for neighbour—that goes deeper than externals—that grows out of a heart that truly loves God above everything else.

But how is that even supposed to happen? Before he died, Moses reiterated the law to the people a second time—deuter-onomy, second law. And when he was finished, he exhorted them in Deuteronomy 30:11: “You can do this. It's not too hard. It's not far off. It's not up in heaven. You don't need anyone to bring it down to you. It's in your mouth and it's in your heart so that you can do it.” Neither Moses nor the Lord expected perfect sinlessness. That's why the Lord had made provisions for atonement in the law. The Lord simply expected them to follow his law, to be the holy people he had made them and for whom he'd made provision to stay holy. All they needed to do was to keep their eyes on him, to remember all he'd done for them, to know his word, to live in his grace.

And I read that passage from Deuteronomy and I think: Okay. Being faithful to the law wasn't *too* hard, but that doesn't mean it was easy. If it had been easy, Israel wouldn't have failed over and over and over. Living on this side of the cross. Living as someone into whom God has poured his Spirit to fulfil his Old Testament promises of heart renewal, I still struggle to love God with all my being and to love my neighbours as myself. We all do. Sanctification is a process. The Spirit doesn't change our hearts all at once, although it's often the case—especially with new believers—that the Spirit will do some amazing things

to jump start the process. I've been at it fifty-three years and there's still lots to do to dig out and uproot the darkness that lurks in my heart. Every time I think I've cleaned house and then sit down with the scriptures again, I hear God speak, and I find there's always something I missed: the baseboard behind the couch needs dusting, I forgot to scrub that invisible spot under the rim of the toilet bowl, or—sometimes—there's a giant pile of garbage in the middle of the living room that I've somehow not noticed all this time. It takes work and prayer and scripture and counsel—and most of all the Spirit—to root all that darkness out and to replace it with love. Really, if I'm honest, I'm kind of sympathetic with the Israelites when they shared their skepticism with Moses. Really, Moses? This isn't too hard? I'm fighting to do it and I'm living in the fulfilment of God's promise of the Spirit to renew my heart? How were they supposed to do it?

But maybe that's just it. Too often we think of the law as commandments to be obeyed—mostly in our own strength. Even Israel wasn't expected to do that. That's why God lived in the middle of their camp. He wasn't going to leave them alone to be holy all on their own, because *that* is impossible. But more importantly, what Jesus says here about loving God and loving each other really starts to come into focus as we see Jesus on the cross, dying for the sins of his people, his enemies, and then rising from death to bring to life God's new creation. Jesus forgives our failures and he invites us into this new life. God even comes to dwell in us—not just in our midst, but *in* us to renew our hearts. And we start to realise that these commandments aren't orders to be obeyed in our own power and strength. Instead, they're invitations into a whole new way of life—an invitation into new creation. They're a hope that looks forward to the day when God finally sets everything to rights. On that day there will be no

more hate and no more pride and no more selfishness and no more sin. We'll be full of love for him and for each other. And so, in light of that invitation and that hope, in the power of the Spirit, we just start to live it now, day by day, bit by bit, welcoming God to expose the darkness and the dirt in our hearts and then gladly cleaning it out and letting light and love and life fill us—day by day and bit by bit, a little at a time as we live in hope—knowing for sure that one day it'll all be done. This is why we live, not only looking back to the cross in gratitude, but also looking forward in a hope made sure and certain by the cross.

But wait, there's more. That's only half today's Gospel. That was the first question. The Pharisees asked it. And now Jesus turns the tables (verse 41): “While the Pharisees were gathered there, Jesus asked them, ‘What's your view of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’”

That probably seems like a weird question to us, but it probably wasn't for them—although they wondered where Jesus was going with it. They knew the answer. It was an easy one. Just as easy as the question they'd asked him. “He's David's son,” they said to him. Nothing controversial there. In fact, Matthew's made it clear right from verse 1 of his Gospel: “The book of the family tree of Jesus the Messiah, *the son of David*, the son of Abraham.” That's how Matthew's Gospel starts. But, of course, it can't be that easy. So Jesus follows up in verse 43, saying, “Why then does David (speaking by the Spirit) call him ‘Lord’ when he says, ‘The Lord says to my Lord, sit here at my right hand, until I place your enemies down beneath your feet.’ If David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?”

What? I should spell that like the Internet meme: “Wut?” I can only imagine how they looked around at each other confused. No surprises when Matthew says, “Nobody was

able to answer him a single word. From that day on nobody dared ask him anything anymore.”

This one would take some time to sink in. I kind of suspect they never did figure it out—at least most of them. Maybe some of them did eventually figure it out in the weeks, months, and years after Jesus rose from the dead. Maybe they believed the stories—or maybe they saw him—and it finally clicked and they believed. But even a lot of Christians who do believe don’t understand what Jesus is getting at. So here’s his point: Just saying that Jesus is the son of David doesn’t give the whole picture. For most of the Jews in those days, “Son of David” brought to mind images of a coming great warrior king. Like a literal David, only greater. And he would restore the kingdom of Israel over which David had once ruled at its height, only greater. The Son of David would expand the borders. He would utterly destroy every one of Israel’s enemies. And there would be no end to his kingdom or his reign. He would put Israel at the top of the heap forever. No Solomon with his idolatry and foreign wives would mess it up. No royal rivalries would split it up. No foreign power would ever bring it down. This was their vision of the world set to rights.

And we can probably forgive them, because it’s easy to read God’s promises that way. Just like it’s easy for the folks in that deconstruction conference to read all the warm-fuzzy passages about Jesus and to forget the ones about repentance and judgement. The passage Jesus quotes is the first verse of Psalm 110—the psalm quoted more than any other by the writers of the New Testament. It’s a psalm attributed to David and it goes like this. Again, Psalm 110 if you’re following along:

**The LORD says to my Lord:
“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your
footstool.”**

**The LORD sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your enemies!
Your people will offer themselves
freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;
from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be
yours.
The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek.”
The LORD is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of
his wrath.
He will execute judgment among the
nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter chiefs
over the wide earth.
He will drink from the brook by the
way;
therefore he will lift up his head.**

It’s right there. The Lord will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgement among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth.” Again, I can’t blame them for expecting the Son of David to come and smash Gentile heads. I can’t...except that there’s still the two greatest commandments in the law: love God with all your being and your neighbour as yourself. You have to account for both. Like our Article XX says, “It is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s Word written, *neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.*”

If the Son of David was just coming to crush and shatter Israel’s enemies, how would that encourage the people, how would that help the people learn to love God with all their being and (especially) their neighbours as themselves? One of the things we see in Jesus, not least as he goes to the cross to give his life for his enemies, is that when we say that word, “God”, we’re talking about the almighty

Creator who not only loves his own people, but who loves the whole world. He loves his enemies enough to humble himself, taking on their—our—flesh, so that he could die the death that their—that our—sins deserve, all to reconcile us to himself and to set right the creation we have broken. And he does it all so that we can have a share in, so that we can once again live in his presence in that new creation.

And so Jesus’ point here is that, if David’s son is also David’s lord, then the great warrior-messiah the Jews hoped for will, in the end, bring the saving, healing, restoring, setting-to-rights rule of this loving Creator God not only to Israel, but to the whole world. And, yes, there will come a day when the last rebellious enemies of his people who remain, when the last rebels against the Gospel will be crushed and wiped from his creation so that it can finally and fully be set to rights, but in the meantime it means that Jesus the Messiah has not come to bash heads. He will indeed put his enemies—and kings and nations—under his feet, but he will do that as the power of the Gospel goes out to the nations—as the good news of the servant king who gives his life for the sake of his enemies turns their hearts to this God who is unlike any god they’ve ever known and as Jesus’ new creation gives them a glimpse of and hope for a world to set to rights the likes of which they never imagined. And that good news will go out and it will go out and it will go out until the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea and when it has done its work, then the Messiah will defeat even death itself.

Brothers and Sisters, hear the scriptures and let this Jesus sustain you. The Jesus who, like David, has gone to battle—who has done single combat against our enemies, against sin and death at the cross. The Jesus who teaches us by his death what it looks like to truly love God with all our heart and life and mind and

strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves. The Jesus who has risen from death and who has poured his Spirit into our hearts so that we can know God's life and God's new creation and live in hope of the day when he will finish what he has started. Not some other Jesus. Not a Jesus we build like a Mr. Potato Head, picking and choosing the parts we like, but *this* Jesus: the Jesus who is both loving shepherd and warrior king; this Jesus who ate with sinners and condemns sin and calls us to repentance; this Jesus who loves his enemies so much that he gave his life for our sake, but who will also one day wipe from his creation ever last remaining bit of rebellion and darkness and sin; this Jesus and only this Jesus who truly reveals the glory of God and moves our hearts to worship and to love and to loyalty.

Let's pray: Almighty God, gracious Father, we give you thank for your promises and for your faithfulness to them. We think today especially of your promises to David and the Prophets that gave them a hope for your Messiah. He is both David's son and your own son, the true Israel, and in him we have forgiveness of sins and the life of your kingdom. We pray that as we live the life he gives, we would also live in hope, knowing your faithfulness and trusting in your promises, and joyfully expecting—and participating in—the work of your Church, empowered by Jesus and the Spirit as we look forward to your renewal of all things. Amen.