



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Freemont, California

Sermon

26. October, 2008. Pentecost 24

Title: **"We've Never Done It That Way Before"**

Text: St. Matthew 22:34-46

J.J.

Kathy+: Good morning and welcome. If you are new here, well, we are, too!

Today's Gospel lesson is another one of those confrontational meetings with Jesus and one of the factions of Judaism.

Romans held the power, as the conquerors of the region. Romans tolerated Jews and their infighting because it kept the Jews too weak to challenge Roman rule.

In the political mix of Jesus' own time we have the Jewish equivalent of red states and blue states and political parties.

Last week we heard about the Herodians who backed Herod and his family. Hoping for something resembling a theocracy, they wanted a government headed by a Jew, harkening back to David and Solomon and such. Herod had a position that was tolerated by the Romans but he was angling for more power.

The Sadducees were Torah literalists. What was in the Torah was the way it was. If it says to stone someone for something, that's what we're gonna do. They didn't like Jesus' interpretation of how to be a Jew and how to regard the Torah.

The Pharisees were not Torah literalists. But they were rule-making Jews who believed you had to produce laws on how to be a good Jew. Torah was important and interpretation was even more important.

All three Jewish groups would have liked to recruit. They ended up being suspicious because he didn't join any of them. And Pilate was interested in Jesus ONLY if he united the Jews against the Romans.

But chief among the groups we confront are those pesky Pharisee lawyer types like the one we have in today's lesson. Mercy me, these Pharisees are a pain in the neck.

David+: Whoa. . . not so fast. Step into their shoes for a moment. For the most part, I think, the Pharisees were well-intentioned. We here at St. James' would probably like to have a dozen of them as members: they attended worship every day, they kept tradition, they volunteered for almost everything, and, in addition, they tithed their time, talent and treasure (our Stewardship Team would be elated!). In many ways the Pharisees would have made good Episcopalians. And as you point out, Kathy, they were not literalists . . . once in awhile they even tried to think creatively outside of the box . . . but, when confronted with something new like Jesus' radical new way of thinking . . . or when confronted with any kind of change, like Jesus the change-agent turning everything upside down . . . well, then they would become very suspicious and respond with their: "We've Never Done It That Way Before" kind of thinking and take the offense. And so, the Pharisee lawyer in today's Gospel, tests Jesus and asks him, respectfully: "Teacher . . . which commandment in the law is the greatest?" An innocent question, no? Well, no! For you see, the Torah, that is, the Books of Moses, contained some 613 commandments, plus all of the additions and interpretations added down through the centuries (and especially by the Pharisees), and Jesus is being tested to list them in the order of their importance (which has been a constant debate among the Jewish people even to this day). But Jesus, thinking outside of the box like he always does, reduces all 613+ commandments into two commandments: "'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. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." The key, says Jesus, is love! Love the Lord your God . . . and Love your neighbor.

Kathy+: With all those interpretations what does it mean to believe in God? Striding through this is the great theologian, Tina Turner. Can you hear her standing near Jesus and the Pharisee singing, "What's love got to do, got to do with it?" The song would be in the Pharisee's head because he wants some answers here. This is a confrontation and still I hear the strains of the song in my head.

What DOES love have to do with it? Why everything, which is Jesus' point.

What we have held so dear as Jews of Jesus' time, the Torah, the laws, the power structures, the conquering of a people or a culture, the infighting of factions, fades in the clear light of love. Sure, you say,

that's easy for you to say, and you're right. Harder yet is living this new reality. Sitting in a meeting where you don't think you're being heard, sitting in traffic exhausted beyond belief and someone cuts in front of you, someone breaks into your house and steals stuff, how hard it is to see the face of Jesus in every person when they try so hard to show you a different face.

Today Jesus cuts through the arguments with an answer about love. And his clever cut-to-the-chase responses to their challenges eventually silences them. Love is the reason you follow and believe and live. Commandments are not there to use as a bludgeon or to spin out into a monumental codex of eat this, avoid that, hate this, love this, exclude these and welcome those. The commandments are there to remind us of love. The first commandment is love of God, commandments two through ten are about our relationships with others. On these rest all the laws and the prophets and the dissension and the fear and the pain and the loss and the uncertainty of their times and ours.

It is right to ask, "What's love got to do with it?"

David+: Well, as you point out, Kathy, everything! Love has everything to do with how we live and move and have our being . . . Love God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment" and the Pharisee-Lawyer would have probably agreed. But Jesus, like always, ups the ante: "And a second is like it: `You shall love your neighbor as yourself'." . . . in other words, love one another, yourself included, just as you love God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . with everything you've got! Indeed, love is the key. And that is going to be a very important key for us here at St. James' in the months ahead. Whatever we do during this interim time, love is the key: to love God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind . . . and to love one another even as we love ourselves. Interim time is not easy time. In fact it can be, and I can assure you it will be, a very challenging time (and we will talk more about that at our first Town Hall Meeting on Tuesday night, here, 7pm—plan to attend!). Earlier, I heard some of you laughed when I mentioned what some of you probably recognized as the seven last words of the Church: (1)We've (2) Never (3) Done (4)It (5) That (6)Way (7)Before. But as you also recognize, that is no laughing matter. Jesus was a change agent, but the Jewish people, and in particularly the religious people, were not ready for or willing to change, and in less than 40 years the temple, their holy place, was destroyed and they, as a nation, were dispersed. And change is happening for us. That's what interim time is all about. But the key for all of this . . . the key is working together in love. So, on this Sunday, as we, your new Interim Co-Rectors (and boy, was that thinking outside the box when you decided to call the two of us), together with your Vestry and each one of you begin our work together as an interim ministry team . . . and that is key . . . our working together as a team . . . this Gospel is most important for us to hear: Love God . . . Love Neighbor . . . and love yourself. Hum . . . interesting . . . that's a new "Seven Words," isn't it . . . Seven Words for a new beginning: Love God . . . Love Neighbor . . . and love yourself.

S.D.G.

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