

Deuteronomy 34. 1-12; Matthew 22.34-46

A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

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Love's Answer

There is at present a nation-wide alert that I hope you all are aware of: Tuesday of this coming week, there will be a free taco provided for every single American. From 2pm to 6 pm at Taco Bell restaurants across the United States, you can walk in and get your free crispy beef taco. Now, this is known as the "Steal a Base, steal a taco" campaign.

It's been instituted during the World Series by our friends at Taco Bell: When a baseball player from either team steals a base – only upon the first time that happens in the World Series -- the Taco Bell company has promised to provide tacos for everyone – everyone in the entire country!

Over the past few days, I think a growing number of Americans have become aware of the free taco which awaits them, because a base has been stolen. (How many of you did not know about your free taco?) Well . . . now you know (who says our announcements at LAC are not helpful?).

In the meantime, what about the specifics? How many can actually name the player who stole the base, the one who made this possible? For the record, it was Jason Bartlett, the shortstop for the Tampa Bay Rays. Jason stole second base in the fifth inning of game 1 of the World Series against the Philadelphia Phillies. Jason's stolen base would have been inconsequential, and actually it was, as it did nothing to effect the outcome of the game. The Phillies won that one (And some of us dearly hope that the Phillies will go on to win the whole Series). But even more than the measly baseball game, how about the fact that one person's special deed became responsible for feeding millions! Remember Jason Bartlett!

Baseball is filled with trivia. And this is a wonderful point of trivial information, I suppose, depending on how you view it. (BTW. Another trivia point: Last year it was Boston's Jacoby Ellsbury whose stolen base put him into the Free Taco Hall of Fame.)

In the Bible, the Pharisee's are keen on trivia and the particularities of the records . . . of religion and the law. Not only that, the Pharisees are intent on pushing their particular points at Jesus, with questions, to test him – as this morning's Gospel passage presents it. And also, the Pharisees are bent on tricking and trapping Jesus. This is where we find him this morning.

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus a question. On the surface, it seems like a proper question – appropriate and respectful enough. "What is the greatest commandment?"

But again, the Pharisees did not ask Jesus questions because they are honestly interested on his views on a subject. Rather, they typically seek to trip him up. Picky about the trivial, they try to make him look bad in the eyes of sister and brother Jew; or even better, they try to catch him saying something they can use against him to tick off Rome, since only Rome could officially do Jesus in.

And so it is that in this account from Matthew that we find a lawyer questioning Jesus. Mind you, Matthew is the Gospel writer who is the most concerned with addressing the traditions of the law, and the law of the traditions. This questioner is one, among the Pharisees, who is expert in the law of the covenant, the Torah law in which there are 600+ laws, statutes and commandments. And in this teaching and tradition – in this

Pharisaic mindset – all laws were important and were meant to be followed. How could anyone say that one law was *more* important than the other? How could anyone dare even to imply that some laws were *less* important than others?

In the movie *Amadeus*, the Austrian Emperor Joseph II asks the composer Mozart to adjust one of his operatic compositions. The young Mozart is hurt, stunned and enraged. Mozart demands an explanation. The Emperor says: "There are just too many notes." Mozart's temper flared; he insisted that there were just the right number of notes necessary – neither too few nor too many.

The Pharisees were not artistic, but they were all the more insistent . . . The number of laws that had evolved over time were just as many as were needed to demonstrate and express obedience to God and fairness person-to-person, no more no less.

So, here comes the lawyer, quick to put Jesus to the test. In essence asking him to consider the hundreds of laws and name the one that is more important than all the others . . .

What Jesus gives is a summary of the law. He distills the entire body of ancient statutes into a simple response: "Love God with your whole self – heart, mind, strength -- and your neighbor as yourself."

The lawyer must have been aghast. The Pharisees were assaulted and insulted by such an answer. Jesus said nothing about duty or responsibility. Nor did he point to any threats of punishment or consequences for those who failed to keep the law. His answer was rooted in love . . . for God, for neighbor, neither of which was possible without love for self.

Instead of picking at the particular and the trivial, instead of the Pharisees' love of the law, Jesus pointed to the law of God's love . . .

Just like in these election times, certain questions have been proffered and presented to those who would lead. Some [questions] been viewed to be so-called "litmus test questions." They've been held up as critical to and for certain groups – "non-negotiables" as megachurch pastors Rick Warren and James Dobson called them -- based on their political, religious persuasion. Abortion, gay marriage, stem cell research, etc . . .

"Non-negotiable" in that if they are not addressed to their satisfaction by the candidate, those folks will vote otherwise -- or in some cases, say those citizens, they will not vote at all.

Yet, we didn't really see the word "poverty" in the Warren-Dobson discourse . . . Which is only one example of the missing issues which are found quite clearly in the Bible – in over 2000 places throughout scripture, we find expressed concerns for the treatment of the poor and oppressed . . . along with the call to peace and to be peacemakers . . . along with the call to be welcoming to the foreigner and stranger, and care for those who are ill and on those margins – the youngest, the oldest. And there is the biblical mandate for hospitality, and Jesus' call to love and pray for enemies.

And what is the greatest commandment, they ask Jesus. And he gives love's answer, the answer in love: to love God and neighbor and self.

Not one without the other . . . Jesus doesn't tell them something the Pharisees do not know. His words are a direct summary of the commandments to love in Deuteronomy

(6.5) and Leviticus (19.18). His answer is really painfully obvious, since these are passages that every practicing Jew recited each morning and night.

It is a call to covenant promise. A return to a realization and understanding that has been missed in the focus on the particular points and matters of concern to the Pharisees.

Just as now, in the in the face of the hard times we are in, and going into, this is a call and a return to the values of cooperation and compassion and community – values that have been weakened and in some cases lost – in recent years --in the midst of marketeering, predatory practices, and the great pursuit of the personal, at the expense of the other and the community we are called to be.

While the former Federal Reserve Chief pleases this past week that he doesn't really know how we got into this." One reason is the focus on "me" instead of "we." And now we are looking at seismic impacts . . . just as the lines of people increase each week at the HOPE food pantry next door in New Rochelle, or an estimated 5 million are having to join those already 40 million without health insurance. Along with difficulties and drops in retirement accounts, college loans, home values.

There will be tough days ahead. This is a call to revisit and return to values and convictions we know in these moments . . . we are called to the values of community and care, to and with one another . . . loving God and neighbor and self.

On the national scene, we don't seem to have a clear plan just yet. We will. But it will be tough up ahead. I am reminded that these tough days are different than 1929 (when this beautiful sanctuary was completed), since – going forward -- we do have certain things in place to help see us through . . . like depositors' insurance, social security and government as a lender of last resort. Let's see . . .

Yet, we do have this covenant as people of faith: the promise of God's love and our call to love one another. Let this be a time and place – this church – where we realize that. There are meals and moments for us to share here – dinners with food and support, pooling together what we have, to maximize what might seem minimal so as to reach out to others; counsel and comfort in crisis and the everyday; a sanctuary open to all – at all hours – for prayer; helping others and in so doing helping ourselves.

We can see these tough times through, and always, by loving God, -- putting others first, through care for neighbor and one another, even as you love yourself – let it be so . . . In Jesus Christ Amen.