



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

October 26, 2008

Proper 25A
Reverend Donna Barr

If my Dad had lived in Jesus' day...I do believe he would have been a Pharisee. Now I know that sounds disrespectful but really it's not all that bad. The Pharisees were the spiritual fathers of modern Judaism. Their main distinguishing characteristic was a belief in an Oral Law that God gave Moses at Sinai along with the Torah. The Pharisees believed that God also gave Moses the knowledge of what these laws meant and how they were applied. They were intellectuals and were well versed in the law but they also were curious and questioning. Testing, confronting and debating was right up their alley and in today's gospel, this was the Pharisees' final attempt to trick Jesus.

Now my Dad also loved to test his own and others' intellect. He was a lover of games - games of all sorts. Golf, ping pong, bridge, crossword puzzles, and any new board game was a favorite at Christmas. He was also creator of his own games for us kids. Guess the double serial number on the dollar bill..... Guess which hand has the hidden quarter..... Scavenger hunts where we had to read the clues running from room to room in search of the hidden treasure.

Some games were just for fun but some games were for learning and growing intellectually. Driving us to school, Dad would introduce a new vocabulary word each week and challenge, not only his children, but everyone to use the new word in a sentence each day.

But the game that had the most lasting impact on me as a person of faith, was one that Dad would subtly introduce into our conversations at the dinner table. I look back on these memories with pain and gratitude. I am grateful for my father's insight and wisdom as he would bring up some point of view concerning a myriad of topics. Politics, education, religion, the death penalty, sports, abortion, science, war, poverty and on and on and on. He would with great joy engage us, with passion, on a particular point of view about a topic or issue. No matter our age, we were encouraged to join into the debate. Questions were asked and ideas exchanged. Sometimes we would agree and sometimes we would not. Sometimes we would laugh and then there were those times of personal attack, and painful arguments when we would be in tears. As children, we were, like it or not, introduced to the world of controversy.

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Then without even noticing.....two or three weeks would go by when that very same subject would be brought up by my father again. But this time my Dad would argue the opposite point of view from the last time. At first, this was a bit confusing to us children, but it was always a catalyst for looking at different points of view and learning to be open minded. My father, the intellect, the trickster, and the debater.....some of the Pharisees characteristics for sure.

The difference between the Pharisees approach and my Dad's, however, was not about learning and not to be open minded, but to absolutely prove that Jesus was not as intellectually savvy as they. Not only had the Pharisees categorized and classified some six hundred laws, they constantly argued over which of them were most important. In today's gospel, these "experts" gang up in an attempt to trip Jesus up by asking him to say which law is the most important.

But Jesus refuses to be rattled. His calm confidence stems from the fact that not only does he have a thorough grasp of the subject matter of the law but he also knows the heart and mind of the lawyer. From Jesus comes a response so simple and yet so profound it silences the crowd.

“You shall love your God with all you heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Our call from Jesus is simple but profoundly difficult. Difficult because if we are to realize loving God and our neighbor we each must face this very important fact: I cannot say my “yes” of love to God without saying my “yes” of love to you. It is so much easier to love the God I don't see than the neighbor I do see. There can be no relationship of love with God unless we relate to one another in love. Sometimes this seems to be the highest cost of being a Christian.

This is what I learned at my dinner table. I am sure my Dad never really thought that his controversial game might inform me of the value of listening to God and loving my neighbor. On hindsight, everyone at our

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table was God and my neighbor. How we treated one another.....negatively or positively has meant all the difference in my life.

Epilogue

From time to time, as I am writing my sermon, I will stop to take a break. This is the place I stopped when I picked up a small little book of prayers and meditations from Mother Teresa. I decided that her words might serve me well and that the preacher, Donna, might just end this sermon with her words. I opened to this place and read these words “there should be less talk; a preaching point is not a meeting point. What do we do then? Take a broom and clean someone else’s house.

That will say enough.

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