

There is a saying, “there are winners in life, and there are losers.” The philosophy behind the proverb is that in the really important issues of life things are black and white. It spawns other sayings like, “no one cares who came in second.” In Canada, an incredible number of eyes have turned to the Toronto, Blue Jays. The question which will be answered over the next couple of weeks is this one. Are they an interestingly good team, or are they championship calibre? If they do not make it to the World Series, this season for all of its memorable moments will be relegated to the category of almost. If they make the World Series and lose, they will suddenly become the team that was not as good as the one in '92. It is a cruel world in many ways. Our focus is easily only on those who win.

There is another saying.... “close only counts in horseshoes.” What this one means is that in virtually every spectator sport, you either score, or you fail. That close only counts in horseshoes, means being second in hockey, or baseball, or soccer, or tennis...you name the game, in business, or even in politics, getting close to a ringer, is to have failed. To have lost. It should not surprise us that Jesus fosters a different point of view. While the world tends to celebrate with only those who succeed in winning, scoring, making it big, God says, in His realm, in His Kingdom, by His standard, coming close really matters.

As Mark 12, verse 28 opens it is apparent there have been debates. Debates are premised on the fact that there are serious differences in opinion. A pharisee posed a real mind bender of a question to Jesus. The background to the question is that part of the

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Jewish Law which provides care of widows by requiring that they be married to the husband's brother. Financial care of the widow becomes the responsibility of surviving males in the family. The questioner postulates where the woman is passed from one brother to another seven times. The question is, in the day of resurrection whose wife will she actually be, having been wife to all seven. Jesus points out that eternity is not measured by the traditions of this world, but by the presence of God.

Then, because Jesus also understands there is a divide between the Pharisees and the Saducees, the latter being the theological liberals of their day, and not believing in the resurrection as the Pharisees did, Jesus points out that if one pays attention to what the Scriptures of the Old Testament actually say...God is not the God of the dead, but God of the living. He is telling us and anyone else who is listening, life after death is to be taken very, very seriously. That the resurrection is not a theological theory...but a testimony to truth: a fact!

There was in the crowd a Pharisee, who was listening closely. Who was impressed not by the questions and his fellow Pharisees, who were doing the asking, so much as he was impressed by Jesus answers. His ears and his mind recognized the taste of wisdom. I believe even more, this Pharisee was impressed by this reality, the teachers of the law were bested by Jesus as He took the Scriptures more seriously than the theologically trained. He did not just know Scripture with an ability to quote from various texts....Jesus clearly believed Scripture. Big difference. Huge difference. His heart begins to thaw. He has been listening to debates....differences of opinion. This Pharisee asks a question, not to try and trick Jesus, not to try and trap Him, but because he really,

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really wants to know what Jesus will say. He is looking for ultimate answers. He is hungry for the truth. "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

I looked this passage up in the commentaries I have at the house. Frankly I was looking for a piece of trivia. I was hoping somebody would have a number. How many commandments are there in the Bible? All of us know there are Ten in that special code that God gave to Moses, written in stone by the flaming finger of God on the Holy mountain. But there are a lot of other commandments, rules for life and living listed in the Bible. This Pharisee wanted to know of all the rules...which one is key? Which one is the most important of all of them? If there is one rule in the Bible you are going to try to make certain you do not fail to keep....which one?

I did not find the answer to my question... "how many rules, commandments are there?" I could almost hear my savvy friends who have a measure of computer expertise that leaves me in the dust, saying Google it. Look it up on Wikapedia. Frankly I did not even try either one.

Why? Because it almost smacks of the same mistake made by the balance of the Pharisees and the Herodians who were there that day. They were not interested in the truth, they were trying to build a trap, a trap in which they could tangle Jesus so that they could make a serious charge against Him. And they were so committed to trapping Him they were willing to use the Biblical words, the Old Testament, Holy writings to that end. Instead of seeking after the truth, they were playing games. What they really wanted was to find a legal way to terminate Jesus.

This one Pharisee is cut from a different mould. He has

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caught the bug. He asks an honest question. One of my commentaries says this about the Pharisee in question. You notice he is not named here. Probably means several things. He was probably still alive when the gospel of Mark was written. To name him would probably mean to put his life in danger as a sympathizer with the followers of Jesus at the least, and he may even have joined them. The commentary in question says this about his question. "It was an honest question, and, in some ways life's most basic question. He was really asking for a concise statement of the chief aim of man's existence."

Some of you are old enough to remember the time when we taught and studied the Shorter Catechism. Question: What is the chief end of man? The question is not about gender, it is about life. What is the chief end of mankind? What is life about for men and women, young people and children? What does it mean to be human?

You see, it is not my insight, that this is a really important question. According to Christian tradition going all the way back to Mark's writing of his account of Jesus life, ministry, death and resurrection...this is part of the definition of what it is to be not only human but a follower of Jesus. It is really basic. And it is really important.

Notice several things. First of all, Jesus did not hesitate to answer. He did not take a poll or call together a focus group to develop a "safe" answer. He knows there are enemies in the crowd. He answers. And his answer is couched in plain words. Secondly, Jesus does not begin by saying "I want to be very clear on this" and then surround the answer with qualifying language so there is a way

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out when it becomes critical to self interest. He is not running for office. He is not a politician. And thirdly we need to be aware of this: his answer has the ring of truth. There was a reason they did not ask Jesus any tricky questions after this. They have discovered that for all their opposition to Him, the Pharisees and the Herodians are not going to back Jesus into a corner based on words. His answers have the ring and the authority of truth.

He begins by quoting the Shema, a statement of faith that is used to define what it meant to be Jewish and what it meant to be Israel. The words are from Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 4. "Hear O Israel: the Lord, our God, the Lord is one." The Christian statement that God is "three in one, and one in three....the concept of the Trinity endeavours to say the same thing. There is but one God. He is experienced by us in 3 different ways...The Father of Jesus, and our Father, the Son in whom we like the Pharisee on that day, meet God, face to face, in a human and tangible form, the Spirit of God who is part of the creation story in Genesis, and part of the experience of Christians from Pentecost to the present. This is who God is in the Scriptures. He is one in number and not part of a collection of gods.

Then Jesus defines our responsibility to God. He says we are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength. I will say that another way. We are called to love God. To love Him with all the emotion at our disposal. Passionately. God is spirit and we have a spirit too. We call it the soul, because the Bible uses that term. To have a soul is to be alive to God and the creation in the midst of which we live. We are to love God with our lives and our life strength. We are to love Him with our minds. Christian faith is never blind faith. We use our

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minds. There is intellectual quality to our faith. If it does not make sense to us we question it. When it does make sense to us we claim to understand. The Scriptures are brain food for living. We are to love God with all of our strength. Not with a portion of our muscle, but with all our muscles can do.

And finally we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. We are

called to love God more than ourselves. We are called to love our neighbour as ourselves. To love God most because HE is most important. To love our neighbours, because people are important. This puts the current refugee crisis in perspective. We cannot pretend they are not in need. We cannot leave them to die on the roadways or in the camps.

This Pharisee said, "Well done!" Good answer. In fact he went on to say something revolutionary. To recognize God is one, and to love Him in this fashion, to love people in this fashion, is more important than the traditions of religion. And I will say that a different way...to be a good Presbyterian means first of all being a good Christian.

Jesus was not silent. He replied to the Pharisee's comments. Jesus said, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." This is when being close counts.

Let us pray;

Lord, our Redeeming God, as we deal with life and all that life brings our way, help us to recognize you as the one God. Help us to love you with all that we have. Help us to love people because they matter to you and are your children, And in doing this, grant that we too may be close to the Kingdom of God. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.