

June 12, 2016 “One More Surprise” Matthew 22:34-40

One of the things I have enjoyed about this particular series is that I learned something new. Something I did not know before. For all the times that I have read and read in public that portion of Acts that tells us the followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch, I had never noticed who did the calling. That the word we have come to cherish so dearly, did not originate with Jesus, or the disciples who led the church in the post resurrection 1st Century was to me, a surprise. That it was the enemies of the church, who coined the phrase, those eager to put people like the Apostle Paul and his mission team on trial, who invented the word...came as a surprise. I stumbled onto it. My first reaction was... “No way!” But there it is.

And of course it explains so much. The tendency of denominations of the church to define the word Christian in terms of themselves, the tendency to think we, our brand, do the Christian thing best! And it explains how the word can on the one hand mean a disciple of Jesus, someone who is really committed, a God fearing person who is credal in terms of their understanding. And at the other end of the spectrum, someone who claims to be Christian, or is painted as a Christian who is simply a moral person with very little if any belief in Jesus. Believers did not invent the word. We have adopted it. We have tried to fill it with Biblical meaning...a Christian is a Christ follower. But here is the kicker...the world as a whole does not pay attention to what we say and thinks it has a pretty good handle on who we are based on what we do...argue, fight, take sides.

This series has in fact so affected me you are likely to hear me qualify my use of the word as in, “we are Christians, that is disciples of Jesus.”

It surprised me, when I stopped to really think about it that Jesus last real teaching time with the disciples, in the upper room, as they ate the Passover meal resulted in His saying, “a new commandment I give you. Love one another. Love one another as I have loved you. By this will men know you are my disciples...that you love one another.” He did not remind them that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit...the trinity. Creator, Saviour, Present with us all the time and everywhere...today.

Love one another. It explains the church's interest in literally creating the hospital movement. It explains medical missions that have historically taken relief in terms of medical care to the four corners of the earth. It goes a long way to explain the church's creation of the University as centers of learning in so many fields that have little to do with theology and church doctrine. Orphanages. Another gift of the Christian movement, the disciples of Jesus to the whole of the world. Care for widows, beginning with Jesus making arrangements for Mary to become part of the disciple John's household. Mission efforts built around taking food to the hungry and help to the destitute of the world. That commandment...love one another has made the world a kinder place. A gentler place. I get appeal letters every month from Mission houses in Toronto whose work is to feed people who cannot support themselves. Disciples of Jesus, Christians, help drug addicts, and give space for AA groups to meet...and AA understands as an organization that without the help of the church they would not be able to meet and minister and help and encourage those who are addicted to alcohol, to have hope of finding sobriety. Love one another. Live that commandment out and you find yourself involved in activity that changes lives. Saves lives. It should not but it did surprise me to see how all this fits together.

Well this morning we look at one more surprise. In Matthew chapter 22 we have the story of the Pharisee, an expert in the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) the Torah. The Law. What we call the first five books of the Old Testament. This Pharisee was the equivalent in modern terms of being a Professor of Old Testament teaching, specializing in the teaching in the Torah.

He is an expert! He comes to Jesus with a question. It is meant to be a trick question, because to answer it Jesus is going to have to choose one text from the Torah over all the other important and significant texts. This Pharisee is leading Jesus on to slippery ground, and he is doing it on purpose. There is nothing noble about what he is trying to do.

“Teacher,” he asks, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Of all the commandments of God to be found in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, which one is the greatest. Remember when Mohammed Ali claimed to be the greatest? Sports commentators were outraged. Howard Kossel took him on, challenging him about that very claim. This Pharisee was expecting Jesus to make an outrageous claim. The bait was in place. The trap was set.

To everyone's surprise Jesus replied with these words: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Jesus said, “This is the first and greatest commandment and the second is like it... “Love your neighbour as yourself.” But here comes the biggest surprise. Jesus adds the comment, “All of the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Did you get that? If you are going to have any hope of understanding the Law...Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus,

Numbers and Deuteronomy, and all the writings of the prophets including Isaiah, including Jeremiah, including Hosea....you have to read them with this perspective in mind... “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. And love your neighbour the way you love yourself.” Surprise! On these two commandments hang all that is in the Law and the Prophets. That's what Jesus said.

Now your reaction may be...duh!!! What else is new? But this is stunning information. Stunning and Profound. Jesus was saying if you are going to understand the creation teaching in Genesis, first of all, you are going to have to love God with all your heart, your soul and your mind. And you are going to have to care about your neighbour. Love your neighbour as much as you love your own life. Jesus is saying if you want to understand the Exodus, or God's giving the gift of the 10 commandments to us to live by, first of all, you are going to have to Love the Lord your God emotionally (with your heart) with mental discipline (using your mind) and entering into the realm of spiritual matters (with all your soul) a totality of commitment. And you are going to have to get real...Love your neighbour the way you love yourself.

I will say it again. Surprise!! Jesus makes the claim that the foundation for sound doctrine, for reading the Scriptures with eyes that can see and ears that can hear is having a passion for God that is emotional on the one hand, uses your head on the second hand, and recognizes the reality that life is more about spirituality than anything else. No wonder we who are the church can at times make such lame and ludicrous statements. Wisdom when it comes to doctrine and Biblical discernment begins with passionate faith, an engaged mind, and a soul that hungers for the banquet of God's grace

and truth. Jesus said, On these two commandments...Love God and love your neighbour hangs all that is to be found in the Law and the Prophets. In other words if we don't start out with a passion for God and real concern for people who live around us...the Bible is never going to flower and bear fruit in our lives. Because that's what it is about...Passion for God and concern for the people that live around you.

In another gospel we are told by the writer that the Pharisee, this professor type responded with something like... “Exactly! You are absolutely correct. You've hit the nail on the head. Well done!” And Jesus said to that Pharisee, “You sir, are not far from the Kingdom of God.” And it was Jesus reply with it's genuine compliment on progress in the grace of God, that caused the questions to stop. From that moment on the Pharisees, the Saducees, the Scribes and the Teachers of the Law stopped trying to trap Jesus with questions and words. They saw He was no amateur. And everything became more serious....and there was very little love involved in their scheming.

Surprise. It takes serious faith, and serious concern about the well being of others to make sense out of God's Word, to read and understand the Bible. And if we live in a society that rejects the idea of believing in God, or being soft when we see people struggling with everything from serious illness, to serious loneliness, and depression, and lack of meaning. How can we expect they would have an interest in the church? And what is ever going to cause these currents in our society to change?

Surprise. Just maybe we are being called to be passionate in terms of our relationship with the Lord...loving Him with heart

and mind and soul. While at the same time we love the neighbour who seems to have no interest in these things. Love that neighbour in the midst of the run of life...sickness and health, hunger and plenty. Doing what we can do to really care. To love like Jesus loves...even when loving becomes painful. Even when our discipleship seems to be costly.

Jesus said, Love one another. As I have loved you even so love one another. By this will all the world see that you are my disciples.

Let us pray;

Heavenly Father, sometimes we find the challenges of faith scary, terrifying. We worry that we won't say the right thing. We fear that our deeds will not achieve what we want them to achieve. Wasted effort and even worse, wasted money. Help us to see our world, right here at home as you see it. Help us to love as you have loved, even unto the cross. Help us to surrender ourselves to your will and your way, for the sake of your Kingdom, and all of your children. In Jesus name we pray. Amen