**This is a Test**

**Matthew 22:34-40**

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You are sitting at dinner with a group of colleagues or friends and the topic of religion comes up. You already know that most, if not all, of the other people at the table don’t practice any sort of religion and, in fact, believe the Christian church to be narrow-minded or, at the least, irrelevant. Sure enough, the conversation turns toward a critique of Christianity in America. As you squirm uncomfortably in your seat, someone turns to you and says, “Wait, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_, you go to church, don’t you? Why?” Do you:

1. Vehemently deny ever entering a church for any reason other than sight-seeing in Europe.
2. Say, “Of course, I do, which makes me a lot better off than the rest of you heathens.”
3. Say, “How about that football game last weekend?” OR
4. Try to find words to express why your faith or your church is important to you.

It’s a sort of extreme example, I suppose, but I don’t think it’s that far from a lot of conversations happening in America right now. Not just about religion but about politics and social justice and much of what we hear on the news. In a polarized church and a polarized country, we seem to be testing each other a lot. These sorts of tense discussions are more and more common, and they can feel pretty uncomfortable - especially when someone is testing our beliefs – challenging values that we hold close, ethical understandings that are part of who we are. We struggle to respond articulately, to manage our emotions, to not be judgmental or intentionally provoke the person with whom we are speaking.

 We find Jesus in a similar situation in our scripture text for today and, as always, I am amazed by Jesus and his incredible composure under pressure. The scripture passage is near the end of the gospel of Matthew. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem, and we know that it will not be long before he will be executed by crucifixion. The Pharisees and Sadducees, religious officials and experts from the Jewish community, are feeling more and more threatened by him. He has built a considerable following among the Jewish people who are attracted to his teaching, his healing, and his love. But, from the point of view of the Pharisees and Sadducees, he is becoming too popular and he is too controversial. He is always breaking the rules – healing on the Sabbath, eating with the unclean. And so they begin to test him in a series of verbal sparring matches, hoping to trip him up with questions about taxes and resurrection and, finally this question, “what is the greatest commandment?”

 What is amazing to me is that nothing seems to intimidate him. Nothing makes him squirm in his seat. He gives an answer that no one can dispute. He quotes from the Torah, “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.” The answer is simple, straightforward, and true - the Pharisees can’t deny that this double commandment sits at the very heart of their faith. Jesus passes the test and wins the sparring match.

 Of course, there are so many other ways he could have reacted. He could have walked away, asking himself why he should bother with these people who just keep goading him. Or, he could have lost his temper and yelled at them, telling them how ignorant they were being. He could have succumbed to fear and simply cowered before them – stumbling and stuttering, unable to articulate his faith and understanding even though his conviction was real. Yet, over and over again in this sort of conversation, he manages to both ground himself in God and answer truthfully and compassionately. He enacts the very words he is saying, “Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself.”

 How do we do that? In tense or difficult conversations, how do we speak the truth in love? I often tell people that I preach whatever sermon it is that I, myself, need to hear. That is true today, as well. I’m not sure I have lived through a time in history when it felt more important to be able to both articulate and live my faith. I want very much to be the kind, merciful, loving person God created me to be. I want to be in right and healthy relationship with God and with all my neighbors. I don’t want to be small or judgmental or to place people in boxes with labels that only serve to make me feel better or superior to them. But, I also don’t want to shy away from what I believe Jesus taught us and how it applies to our world today. So, I keep working at loving – really loving – everybody, really everybody.

 And it’s hard work. We are human. But, whether the conflict we have is with an argumentative teenager or a disrespectful colleague or someone who holds the opposite political or religious point of view, we are called to emulate Christ. To find the balance between speaking our truth and speaking with love and respect.

 Over time, I have come to believe that the best way to find that balance and keep myself on track is to be intentional in the time I spend with God. The only thing that effectively calms my anger, centers my head, gives me perspective, and leads me into the kindness I want to offer to the world is taking the time to nurture my relationship with the Source of Love and Life.

 To that end, one of the habits I have taken up again recently is what is called the Daily Examen. If you find yourself stressed by people around you. If you can’t handle listening to the news anymore. If you feel as though your faith is being tested. You might consider the examen yourselves.

If you’re not familiar with it, the examen is a daily spiritual practice in which you reflect back on your day. You may do that silently in your heart and mind. Or, if you’re like me, you may prefer to journal. Alternatively, you can pray the examen through art and imagery. As I mentioned in the announcements, next week I’ll be teaching a class on visual journaling, and we’ll talk about doing the examen through images.

 The examen comes to us from Saint Ignatius – in fact, you can learn more about it on the Loyola Press website, ignatianspirituality.com. There are five parts, and it usually takes about fifteen minutes to work through. **You begin by becoming aware of God’s presence through breathing and silence. As you settle into God’s presence, you review your day and give**

**thanks to God for all the good moments in it – the positive interactions, the beauty, whatever brought you joy that day. Then, you ask God to help you see the points in the day when you could have done better - been kinder, more loving, or more honest about your beliefs, more courageous in defending others. You end with prayers for courage and compassion for tomorrow.**

 There are, of course, other ways to center ourselves in God – conversation with a friend or small group, spending time reading scripture, coming to worship, other styles of prayer. What you do needs to work for you – needs to help you feel like you are re-connecting with the good in God, in yourself, and in the world – so that you can be the loving person you want to be. So, you can fulfill that great commandment.

 There is one other point to be made, though. Sometimes, the most loving response when you are feeling tested or stressed by the world around you is not to soothe or calm your emotions but to use them. While Jesus was amazing in his ability to stay focused on love that did not mean he was passive. He engaged those who tested him and if he became aware of injustice, he did not hesitate to call that out. To speak up for the weaker, the marginalized, the silenced. To turn over the tables of the money changers in the temple. To point out the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees.

 Sometimes, the most loving thing we can do is to express our love for God by standing up for our neighbor - tapping into the anger we feel when we see someone mistreated or denied the basic rights of human dignity. We can’t remain silent if we know God’s children are suffering at the hands of others. We express our love for the weak by challenging the strong. And again, I believe we recognize when that is needed, and we find the courage to do it, by spending time in conversation with God.

 There are some Christians who believe that God tests us. I do not – that concept of God doesn’t fit with the loving and grace-filled God I see personified in Jesus. However, I do believe that life is full of tests. Some are like the ones pictured on your bulletin – objective questions that have a correct answer. But, many are tests of character, of faith, of our willingness to speak and to listen. They require us to know who we are, who God is, and what God calls us to do. They require us to love – and to understand what it means to act on that love. They require us to be our best selves as Jesus taught us to be. Sometimes, gentle, compassionate, merciful. Sometimes, strong, emboldened, and prophetic. The only way to know what is called for and to find the stillness of soul or the fire of righteous anger is to be aligned with God.

 May you face the tests before you with courage and with love today and always. Amen.