

Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Sermon – July 3, 2005
You asked for it: Good News
Matthew 22:34-40
The Rev. Missy Shiverick

Twenty four years ago next month, this church and the Presbytery of the Western Reserve ordained me as a minister of the word and sacrament. At that time, I remember being overwhelmed that someone such as I would be called to serve the Church of Christ and also humbled that I might not have the skills and gifts to help bring God's realm on earth.

It has taken me years to realize that I do have a specific call to the ministry and it is indeed a part of God's plan. You see I was not the typical kid to be called to the ministry. As those of you who knew me back then can attest, it was somewhat surprising. First of all, I was shy, not a natural public speaker and second of all I was a fun loving sorority girl who hadn't embraced her deep spiritual side as much as my social life. My application for seminary asked what offices and awards I had received at college. Perhaps the reason the admissions director to McCormick Seminary called my college to see if it was a joke application was that I stated I had been social chairman of my sorority for two years and was a fraternity sweet heart.

OK, so now you have it.... My dirty past! But it is also very much a part of me and has been incorporated into my understanding of my call and gifts I bring into the ministry. In a spiritual sense, God called me to set the table and invite people to attend God's great feast. I feel called to spread the good news that in the Christian Church, there is a wonderful community of people waiting to love and care for all. I feel called to create the Christian hospitality and to continually extend the invitation. Come, All are invited. Come, all are loved. Come to this spiritual meal as it is for all. That is why I jumped at one person's "you asked for it" sermon request on how we are to respond to judgmental Christians who feel that a literal translation of the Bible, a narrow defined lifestyle, and an anti-choice, creationist word view is the only definition of Christian faith lived out. How do we respond to the statement that you are not a Christian if you do not live a certain way, or believe a certain doctrine, or believe the inerrancy of the Bible. Her question was about inclusively versus exclusivity: Who is in the sorority and who has been black-balled.

This mornings Gospel lesson is good news for us in responding to such critics. It offers us a summation of what Jesus saw as God's Law and a way in which we can interpret the rest of the Torah.

Listen now for the word of God as it is written in Matthew 22:34-40. When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer asked him a question to test him. Teacher which commandment in the Law is the greatest? He said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the

greatest and first 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. Amen.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

The scripture passage I just read is referred to as “the Greatest Commandment” or the “Summary of the Law”. It is a combination of two verses from the Common Scriptures. from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 and it is an example of a common Jewish teaching style. The Rabbi’s in Biblical times would sum up the heart of religion in a few laws. One example is Psalm 15 where the psalmist got the laws down to 11 and in Micah 6:8 where the laws are summed up in three. The summary of the law was not disputed by those listening to Jesus in this passage and also in the parallel passage from the Gospel of Mark. Luke even has the unknown lawyer utter the commandments and Jesus agrees with him. The commandment is not the shocker in this passage; the shocker is the last sentence, “On these two commandments hang all the law and all the prophets.” Jesus offers the measuring stick by which we accept all other law and scripture. This is radical!

This is Jesus doing Bible criticism, Bible interpretation, Bible exegesis... Jesus is saying that everything in the Bible must be weighed on these two laws. This is radical! This is not summarizing the laws but offering a way to interpret all the other laws that are written. We weigh and shape our interpretations of the rest of the Torah on these laws. We are given a standard, a measuring stick for aspects of our faith and discipleship.

Could this be that Jesus is endorsing measuring the Biblical Laws to see if they comply with God’s law? That would mean questioning, that would mean weighing one thing against another... questioning... not just accepting things literally.

Several years ago I ran head on into the situation brought up in this morning’s sermon request. Unfortunately or fortunately it was televised. I was asked at the last minute when a nun from Catholics for Choice backed out to debate the choice issue on a morning talk show with the Rev. Tuchia from Operation Rescue. Operation Rescue is an anti choice organization that had targeted Cleveland for a campaign and was picketing Planned Parenthood and Abortion Clinics. I have been on the Clergy Advisory Board for Planned Parenthood Federation of America for several years but had not debated publicly with an anti-choice person before.

The debate started with Rev. Tuchia telling me I was going to hell if I did not accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and accept the Bible as the word of God. I believe his attempt to discredit me failed when I professed both. Like so many narrow evangelical Christians, he had narrowed his definition of Christianity to his personal faith and set of laws. As a progressive evangelical, I did not fit in his mold. Our discussion on abortion became much more compassionate and not combative after we established the faith we shared in common even though we would never agree on the topic we were debating. We ended up discussing two Christian views on a heated topic, not damning each other on the morning television. It was, perhaps as close as we could get.

And this type of plurality is most likely seated in this sanctuary as well. We are all Christians, wrestling with our faith or we wouldn't be here in this church but would instead be at home reading the Sunday Paper. I know that we are all looking for a relationship with God and seeking who Jesus is in our daily lives. But we most likely differ in our views on how faith plays out in life and in how we interpret scripture. Our faiths are living, evolving, and changing and we might not be on the same spiritual page next week than we are right now. We are not asked as we take communion today to prove our worthiness to come to the table, but we will commune together as people wrestling with our faith and equally unworthy of God's redeeming love.

I shared with a girlfriend who is not a church person what my sermon topic was going to be. She said this topic was what kept her out of the church. She did not like being judged for not having the correct faith. She described the topic as an analogy with alligators and sheep. They should not mix or be left alone together.

Although I have at times felt like the sheep left in the room with the alligator, I no longer get angry and defensive in response to the person who judges progressives as not really Christian. It has been my experience that if you discuss your faith and centrality of the role of Scripture in your life there is common ground for discussion. Look to this morning's scripture passage as a framework for discussion. It is kind of like those hokey WWJD – What Would Jesus Do bracelets that were so popular a few years ago. To their credit they invited thought and discussion on living a life as Christ's disciple. It can invite discussion on Christianity in a way that equals the playing field. We all can accept this The Great Commandment or Summary of the Law and build from there.

John Cairns, a pastor at Forth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and a good friend of Paulo's and mine, used to teach the Christian Theology portion of the New Member's classes when we worked together. He began each New Member Class by saying that faith was like a train trip. We are all on this faith journey together which is powered by God. Some of us are sitting comfortably in the lounge cars enjoying the trip, some are in the head cars being the engineers, and others of us are just barely hanging on to the caboose. And throughout our life faith journey we might be in different parts of the train.

And as Presbyterians, this is alright. We have faith that as long as God is in charge, we are going in the right direction in our pilgrimages. Alas, the growing churches seem to be the ones with the same narrow boundaries of beliefs and narrow interpretations. My work on the Presbytery led me to believe it wasn't their conservatism that made them grow; it was that they could state who they were and what they believed. And the churches that could state unapologetically with the same conviction that they were open in their beliefs and open in their invitation to the community were also growing. We are Christians! We are searching! We are loved by God!

On a final note, because it is our Independence Day weekend and somehow blind allegiance to the government has somehow been mixed with blind allegiance in our Christian faith, I make the final observation. In this past May's Harper's Magazine the late James Luther Adams, who taught at Harvard Divinity School was quoted to having

predicted 25 years ago that the future liberal Christians would contend with Christian fascists who would not sport swastikas but would cloak themselves in the language of the Bible, would carry crosses and chant the Pledge of Allegiance. Their first target would be the homosexual community. How prophetic was he!!

William Sloan Coffin in answer to that type of Christianity and politics says in his new book "Credo", "America, love it or leave it". I believe that. The trouble with that slogan, which found its way onto endless bumpers during the Viet Nam War, was that it didn't mean what it said. It meant, "America, obey it or leave it", as if the national unity were more patriotic than national debate, especially when that unity seems to many to be based on folly. If the American people are worth the salt I think they're worth, they will never be politically united. A nation in consensus is a nation ready for the grave. Love of country, like love of parents is never to be equated with blind obedience, as Jesus himself so poignantly demonstrated."

We are strong when we are questioning. We are strong when we are wrestling with issues of our faith. Let's celebrate each person's faith journey and the different paths in which God has called to sojourn. Amen.

The Rev. Missy M.D.V, M.S Shiverick