

There are two paragraphs in today's gospel reading, and each of them features a question. Much of our conversation revolves around questions. Sometimes we ask rather banal questions like, "How are you? How's your day going?" Other questions are more profound. "Will you marry me? What's the prognosis? Will the Padres ever win the World Series?"

When I was a teenager, there was a rather delicate, sensitive young woman in our parish youth group called Dorothy. My father was vicar of the church, and one day he came to visit the youth group and in an attempt to initiate a conversation with Dorothy, he asked a question that was meant to be a sort of banal introductory kind of question, but it turned into something else. He pointed at Dorothy and said, "What's the motif?" Referring to a badge on her sweater. Dorothy just went very red and started shaking and eventually ran off and wasn't seen for several days. We found out later that she thought that my dad had pointed at her and said, "What's the motive?" sort of accusing her of something.

There are two questions, as I say, in the gospel reading. The first is asked by the Pharisees. It's another trick question. It says, "They asked Jesus this question to test him." As we say today, it's a gotcha question. Their question was this. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" It would appear to be a simple question, and indeed, it gets a simple answer. Oftentimes when Jesus is asked a question, he returns the question by asking another question or asking his questioners to do something. Last week, he was asked a question and he asked his questioners to produce a coin. There's none of that this week.

Jesus fires back a straightforward response, seemingly without hesitation. He answered, "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 a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments, hang all the law and the prophets."

The first commandment that Jesus is quoting from here comes from the book in the Old Testament of Deuteronomy. It's part of the shema, the basic and elemental core of Judaism. It's the sentence which still begins every Jewish service and it's the first text which a Jewish child commits to memory.

The second commandment which Jesus quotes comes from the Old Testament book of Leviticus that we heard read earlier. What's striking and original about Jesus's reply here to the Pharisees is that he links these two commandments and he puts them on an equal footing. He boils religion down to one word, love. Love of God and love of neighbor. He could have said something else. He could have said, "Do the right thing. Be good." Instead, simply says, "Love."

We do well to think about what he means by that. We've overused that word love, and it's almost become debased. We love a movie. We love chocolate. We could even love chicken tikka masala, but that's not the kind of love which Jesus is talking about. We've reduced love to a feeling. It's because of a free flowing feeling that follows on from enjoyment. We don't think of love as a discipline, as practice, as exercise or effort. We fall in love. We insist love is blind. It can happen at first sight. We say it breaks our hearts or the course of love never runs smooth. We talk and think of love as if we have no power or agency over it. See if it just happens. We've reduced love to a feeling, not a verb, and that's not what Jesus thought. He doesn't say, "I hope you have it in your heart to find love." He says love is the first and greatest commandment. Meaning it's not a matter of personal affinity feeling or preference. It's not a matter of lucky accident.

It's a matter of obedience to the one we call Lord. It's a challenging call. Biblical love makes us vulnerable. It requires trust. Love spills over the margins and boundaries. Love takes effort, time, discipline, and transformation. We naturally want to choose those who we love based on our affinities and preferences, but Jesus's commandment is more demanding than that. It's

all inclusive. We have a God who first and foremost wants our love, not our fear or our piety or our penitence. We have a God who wants every one of his children to also feel loved by us, not shamed or punished or judged, but loved.

We worship a God who was incarnate, made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, so it makes sense that Jesus links our love of God with a love of neighbor. We cannot love God in a disembodied way that doesn't touch the dirt and depths of this world. Our love of neighbor puts flesh and bones on our love of God.

There's a second question in this gospel passage, in the second paragraph. Unusually, it's a question asked by Jesus, and it's definitely not one of the banal "How are you?" types of questions? Jesus turns to the Pharisees and says to them this deep profound question. "What do you think of the Messiah?" It's a question which gives rise to a complex answer, but I want to explain it a bit to show that the answer to this question too, is about love.

Jesus, we see in the gospels, does not let his disciples proclaim him as the Messiah till he's re-educated them on what a Messiah is or who he was as Messiah. We see throughout the gospels that the Messiah was understood wrongly by the people of the time as the son of David. There was a common expectation that one day a great militaristic prince from the line of David would come who'd conquer Israel's enemies and bring back the glory days of old. In Jesus's time, the Roman occupation, these hopes had reached fever pitch. What Jesus is doing here is challenging that belief. He's saying it's not enough to call the Messiah the son of David, an earthly Prince. The Messiah is David's lord. Jesus is saying, son of David is not an adequate way of understanding the term of Messiah, as understanding his own messiahship and ministry. Jesus knew himself to be the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the one long promised, the son of God. Messiahship to Jesus is not to be thought of in terms of Davidic conquest, but rather in terms of divine and sacrificial love.

God was incarnate, made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, so that he could embody the God who is love.

In what seems to us a rather obscure way, Jesus is making an enormous and great claim. In him there came not the earthly conqueror who would repeat the military triumphs of King David, but the son of God, who would demonstrate the love of God, supremely in his self sacrifice upon the cross.

Saint Paul said this, "God proves his love for us in that whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us." By his death, Jesus showed that there were no limits to God's divine love. What we see on the cross is love's endeavor, love's expense.

What we have in our gospel today are two paragraphs centered around two questions, both of which have the answer love.

Let me close by reading a blessing, a prayer of blessing, that I've come across this week.

"The world now is too dangerous and too beautiful for anything but love. May your eyes be so blessed you see God in everyone, your ears so you hear the cry of the poor. May your hands be so blessed that everything you touch is a sacrament, your lips so you speak nothing but the truth with love. May your feet be so blessed you run to those who need you and may your heart be so open, so set on fire, that your love, your love changes everything. May the blessing of the God who created you, loves you, and sustains you be with you now and always. Amen."