

## ENDING AND BEGINNING'

MATTHEW 22:34-46; DEUTERONOMY 34: 1-12; I THESSALONIANS 2: 1-8

October 26, 2008

University Church of Chicago

Eugene H. Winkler, pastor

Is it the first task of the preacher to get the congregation's attention? You would think so, wouldn't you? How do you get all those jaded, sophisticated, television-sotted, sound-bite-infected folks to listen? How can you hook them into the Gospel's orbit?

In the middle of the last century a debate went on in Germany between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner about that very issue. They argued back and forth about "the point of contact." The question was: What is the point of contact of the gospel upon the ear of an unbeliever? Professor Barth said: "There is no point of contact. The image of God has been totally erased (in the modern mind). He said to his students, "Don't ever prepare an introduction to your sermon. What are you trying to do, get them interested? There's nothing there to get interested. Do not get involved in the idolatry of homiletics, trying to be interesting. Just present the Gospel. God prepares the ear; God gives the message. Trust totally in God for all of it, and that's it."

Professor Brunner objected, "No, no, no, no. There is something to the way you craft the sermon. There's many a preacher who will, on account of what is said, go to heaven, but on account of how it is said, will go to hell."

Truth to tell: sermons, like most other parts of life, are best served by the dictum that less is more. By this I mean that if you want to preach well or live well or write well, you have to guard against spattering out in irrelevant directions. All of us have constantly to relearn simplicity. That's why this lection from Matthew's Gospel is one I love. What a minimum of words, Jesus sums up the meaning of life: "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" (v. 42-43).

Our Lord makes this statement in response to a query from the Pharisees, the keepers and interpreters of the Mosaic Law. They were, may I remind you, not clergy but laity. They were good people, righteous people, but like some of us, too zealous in their interpretation of what is right and what is wrong.

I hate to tell you this, dear friends, but you and I are more like the Pharisees than we are like the followers of Jesus. Often in life when we find ourselves in difficult situations we choose the path of least resistance, or, rather, we refuse to choose. When we need to be decisive, we go passive. If you want to be good, you have to make choices that undergird the good, but the truth is that much evil is simply a refusal to choose. This is an important point to make in a country that makes much of freedom of choice. For what is freedom of choice if you will not make the moral choice?

Some of the worst things in my life have occurred because of my own indecision. I've watched things happen that I could have prevented in myself or around me had I been more decisive. I've paid for those moments of indecision, but worse than that, people I love have paid a higher price.

I remember a short story from the pen of that wonderful, iconoclastic writer, John Gardner, who was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident when he was at the top of his form. It began in this way:

"One day in April—a clear blue day when the crocuses were in bloom—Jack Hawthorne ran over and killed his brother David. Even at the last minute he could have prevented his brother's death by slamming on the tractor brakes, easily in reach for all the shortness of his legs, but he was unable to think, or rather thought unclearly, and so watched it happen as he would again and again watch it happen in his mind, with nearly undiminished clarity all his life."

Oh, my goodness! How many times have you and I watched things happen that could have been prevented if we had been clearer, more decisive? That's true of us as a nation. The war in Iraq happened because too many of us chose to be passive in the face of lies told us by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, et al. The war in Afghanistan worsens—and will get much worse—because we choose not to read the lessons of history—that everyone who has tried to conquer that nation has failed—going all the way back to Alexander the Great—Russians, the British, and now Americans.

We forget the warning of Edmund Burke that "All it takes for evil to flourish is for a few good people to do nothing." For all our protestations about being liberal and active, most of us like to find ourselves in the front of the bus, in the back of the church and in the middle of the road.

In this confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus is decisive about what matters. In Matthew's account of this dialogue, they come to **test** him (only the devil and the Pharisees are the subject of this verb in Matthew's gospel). They address him as "teacher." It is an insincere title and stands in contrast to the believers' address, "Lord." In Matthew's understanding this is more than a religious debate. The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Evil confront one another.

The rabbis had counted 613 commands (248 positive commands corresponding to the number of parts of the body; 365 negative commands responding to the days of the year). Although rabbinical teachers could indulge in giving "summaries of the Law," there was also the view that all commandments were equal. Thus, any ranking of them would be human presumption. So, Jesus is confronted: Sum it all up, the Pharisees demand. We have all these laws. Which are most important.

The American Academy of Religion will meet next week in Chicago, and several of us will attend those very stimulating discussions and lectures. Perhaps three thousand scholars from around the world whose books you read gather into all kinds of study groups and special meetings and seminars. People run from banquet to banquet and paper to paper and conversation to conversation.

Fred Craddock tells of being at the AAR meeting in Los Angeles several years ago and being encountered by a woman, frantic fear and high anxiety on her face. Under her arm she clutched a black zippered Bible, and she said, "Are you attending this meeting of Bible teachers?" Craddock said, "Yes." She said,

“Is it open to anybody?” and he said, “What’s your interest?” She said, “I have wasted my life—I would like to be a Christian.”

Well, there wasn’t anything on the program of the American Academy of Religion for her! Craddock didn’t dare send her in to a discussion of Wittgenstein and all that. What was he going to do with this seeking woman? He steered her off to one side, to a refreshment stand, and for over an hour they talked. They talked about being a Christian. Before they parted, Fred marked her Bible for her, some places where she could read upon her return home.

This is not, as Craddock says, a criticism of the American Academy of Religion. But the meeting was simply not designed for a woman like that. To criticize the AAR would be as stupid as criticizing a medical researcher for not seeing patients. But if nobody had spoken to her, if nobody had listened to her questions, there would be no reason for the American Academy of Religion.

To link our faith with our actions, our knowledge with our witness is to approach the core of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Your problem—and mine—is that we divorce what we profess from what we do.

Christian faith is, first and foremost, trust in and obedience to the free and gracious God made known in Jesus Christ. Authentic faith is not a sedative for world-weary souls, no laptop computer filled with ready answers to the deepest questions of life. Instead, faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ sets an inquiry in motion, fights the inclination to accept things as they are, and continually calls in question unexamined assumptions about God, our world and ourselves.

The thing about the Pharisees in this incident is that they want to deny the mystery. They want everything to be simple. But the truth is that we are confronted by mystery in all the central affirmations of our faith: the wonder of creation; the humility of God in Jesus Christ; the transforming power of the Holy Spirit; the miracle of forgiveness of sins; the gift of new life in Communion; the call to the ministry of reconciliation; the promise of the consummation of God’s reign.

As Gabriel Marcel has explained, a mystery is very different from a problem. While a problem can be solved, a mystery is inexhaustible. A problem can be held at arm’s length; a mystery encompasses us and will not let us keep a safe distance.

A great source of chagrin for me is that national leaders like George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and David Cheney profess to be Christians. The president is a member of Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas. The vice-president is a member of First United Methodist Church in Cheyenne, Wyoming. And Mr. Rumsfeld is a member of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. Yet, as far as I can see, their professed Christian faith has little linkage to their political and moral actions.

However heretical it may seem to say this: Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld as well as their evil cohorts in this administration who justify CIA rendition of prisoners to countries where torture is an acceptable means of interrogation; our own torture of Muslims by sleep deprivation, electrical shock, water-

boarding and a host of other equally evil methods; all that Guantanamo represents in our self-understanding are no different from you and me.

There is an inseparability between the two commandments: to love God with the whole self and to love the neighbor. The second commandment is “like” the first one. The second one gives focus to the first one. It’s practical. It points to the ways in which we love God. What we do on Sunday morning in University Church is not divorced from the way we live tomorrow and the rest of the week.

Moreover, let’s face the fact that often humanist and secularists and atheists keep the second commandment in ways that far exceed what most Christians or Jews do. Still, for us God remains the ultimate point of reference for our lives.

Carlyle Marney was involved in a late night bull session with a group of college students at the University of North Carolina several years ago when one of the students asked, “Where was the Garden of Eden?” Marney quickly replied, “518 Elm Street, Knoxville, Tennessee.” The student was taken aback. “No. Really. Wasn’t it in Mesopotamia or somewhere in the Middle East?”

“No,” Marney said. “When I was six years old, my mother gave me a quarter to go to the grocery store to buy a loaf of bread. I took the money and spent it all on candy. Then I went home and hid in the closet. My Mom came looking for me and she asked the same questions God asked of the man and the woman: Where are you? What have you done? Why are you hiding?”

The problem with the Pharisees in this incident is that they presume their own innocence. They know the Law, they know what’s right, what’s wrong. So they do not come to Jesus merely to ask a question. They want to trap him. When we presume to be innocent, God’s forgiveness cannot be appropriated. But does that mean that God turns away from us? The answer is never more clearly given than in the communion service: “This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you.”

I think it is hard to learn anything important at all in this world without suffering. Growth entails growing pains. Love can be painful. Perception is painful when truth is harsh. So we set up defense mechanisms to prevent us from suffering. In universities we do this by dealing only with problems the mind can solve. In churches we do this by dealing only with those problems that are easy and most apparent. What we’re learning over and over again in this presidential campaign is that the worst thing about private prosperity is that it obscures public poverty.

It’s hard to be a Christian, isn’t it? But it’s too dull to be anything else. It’s very hard to bear the agony of choice and decision, but it’s inhuman to refuse it. So in this tough time of testing that we are going through politically and culturally, we need to ask God for more courage to stand against our own self-righteousness as well as those sophisticated people who despise us.

The answer is simple without being simplistic. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength. And you shall love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.

