

Finding the Center

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 22:34-40

Delivered on July 9, 2017 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

Sometime a few years ago, I was watching the show “Hoarders”. You know the one; it’s the show about people who never throw anything away. Now, before I go any further, I want to tell you that I am aware that some of you are privately shaking your head at me in shame, wondering in disbelief how I could watch a show like that, but most of you know that you have watched this show at some time or another too. Here’s something else you know. You know that while you have watched this show and seen someone with so much junk in their house that they can’t even get to the door, you have said to yourself, “Thank goodness I’m not *that* bad.”

Well, I don’t mean to make light of a tragic situation, because when someone has a hoarding problem, it is really very sad. And on one episode that I watched a woman who was a hoarder was meeting with some counselors trained in the psychology of hoarding who were trying to help her. They tried to walk her through throwing things away that you would never imagine that someone would keep like used paper plates and used paper napkins. But she would not have it. She would explain why this item or that item was important—why it was a part of her life. Finally though, as she was rummaging through all her garbage, there came a point at which beneath all the used paper plates and paper napkins and all other kinds of dirty, soiled and worthless items, she came upon some of her wedding photos—professionally done wedding pictures that had been ruined underneath all this garbage. She had not seen these pictures in years, hidden as they were under all this junk, and when she saw what condition they were in, and what she had done to them, well, naturally, she broke down and cried. And

realizing that this was a teaching moment, one of the counselors said to the woman, “You see, if everything is important, then nothing is important. If everything, including soiled paper plates and paper napkins is important, then nothing, not even wedding photos are important.”

Some things we recognize as being important and other things we do not. Some of our possessions take a central role in our lives and others do not. Some of our memories take a central role in our lives and others do not. And it is that way when it comes to our faith. There are certain books of the bible, for example, that we read over and over again. We read the gospels, we read Acts; we read Romans. In the Old Testament we read Genesis, Exodus, and a few other books. But we hardly ever read Obadiah; we hardly ever read Nahum. We hardly ever read Titus, Philemon or Jude. As we consider who wrote these books and what they had to teach, we just don’t consider them quite as central to our faith as these other books.

But realize what I did not say, while I said that Nahum, Titus, and Jude do not have a central role in our faith, I did not say they were unimportant, and that, well, forgive me, but that is important. That is an important distinction because it is one which will help us to understand today’s gospel reading.

You see, in today’s gospel reading, the Pharisees who often find themselves as opponents of Jesus and his disciples want to set a trap for Jesus. Now, I almost don’t even have to tell you the story of how this trap is going to end, because I think you already know that when someone tries to trap Jesus things are not going to end well for that person. Jesus is divine, after all. And so when you see words in your gospels which say “they said this in order to trap him” or “they said this in order to test him” you already know how this is going to end.

And so one of the Pharisees, who was an expert in the law has a test for Jesus and in this test he says “What is the greatest commandment?” And you know why that is a test, don’t you? Of course you do. It is a test because he wants to get Jesus to admit that some parts of the law do not matter. He wants to catch Jesus saying “It does not matter if you tithe or it does not matter if you take the Lord’s name in vain, or it does not matter if you keep the Sabbath.” And all the Pharisees are standing around with their I-phones so they can get a video of Jesus admitting these things and then upload it onto Youtube as soon as the words leave his lips. And they can say “We got him. We got him.” And what would getting him be? Getting him would be trying to show that Jesus is no Messiah. It would be to expose him as someone on the contrary, who has come to destroy all holiness and piety and faithfulness to God. And why did they think they can expose Jesus like that? Well, after all, Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, which you weren’t supposed to do, or so the Pharisees thought. He spent time associating with tax collectors and sinners, characters that religious people wouldn’t hang around with. His disciples did not go through all the old traditions like doing ritual hand washing before they ate their food. Surely this man was trying to do away with every good and holy teaching from Moses and the prophets and they just wanted him to admit it. And so, one of them asked “What is the greatest commandment?” Which one matters, and which ones don’t matter?

Well, at first it seems that Jesus is about to fall into this trap because he says there is a greatest commandment. In fact, he says, there are two. They are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul and your mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. But then he adds this. He says on these, on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Now, why is that worth noticing? Why is that so important?

It is worth noticing because Jesus is saying what makes these two commandments the greatest is not that we can keep them and throw all the other commandments away. That's what the Pharisees were hoping he would say, but that's not what he says. Jesus says what makes these two commandments the greatest commandments is that they are the key to understanding all the others. All these other commandments about tithing and Sabbath keeping and taking the Lord's name in vain matter, they matter because these are ways of keeping these commandments to love God and love neighbor.

Now, I think everyone here knows part of what I am saying today. Part of what I am saying is that if you truly love God then you will want to do all the things that God tells you to do. You know, a two year old or three year old child can say to his parents "I love you mom" or "I love you dad", and then not listen to a thing they say, and they are of course being as sincere as they know how to be when they say I love you to mom and dad, but when you get older and more mature, you realize that if you truly love someone with a mature love, then you will want to do the things that they ask you to do. Now, speaking for all the married men in this congregation, because we all love our wives, when they ask us to do things like mow the lawn, we say "We'll get right on that." Don't we? And sometime before the kingdom comes, the lawn is mowed.

We do the things that God wants us to do because we love God. You know part of what we do in this church every Sunday is have a prayer of confession and an assurance of pardon in which I pronounce God's words of forgiveness to you, and then we sing the *Gloria Patri* where we say "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost." And we sing that because that is one appropriate way of responding to the good news of our forgiveness, that is by singing glory to God, by expressing our love of God. But did you also know that sometimes what

other churches do instead of singing the *Gloria Parti* is that they actually recite the Ten Commandments? Now, you say reciting the Ten Commandments, that's weird. Why would some congregation do that? They do that because in their view, the appropriate way of responding to the good news of God's forgiveness and expressing their love for God is by obeying God. And so they recite the Ten Commandments as a reminder to themselves of the kinds of things that God commands.

One of the reasons Jesus tells us that we are to follow what God commands is because following everything that God commands is a way of expressing our love of God. But that isn't the only reason. We also follow everything that God commands because loving our neighbor is also the essence of our faith and all the commandments in some way or another involve the kinds of actions we do when we love our neighbor. You see, one of the reasons we do things that someone wants is because we love them, but what that person wants could be anything. What my wife wants from me is for me to mow the lawn, but she doesn't have to want me to mow the lawn, she could want me to do the dishes, or to take out the trash, or she could want me to do the laundry, it could be anything. And the same thing is true of God. If the whole reason we obeyed the Ten Commandments and the golden rule and all that we are commanded is just because we love God then we could do anything just because God commands it.

But we don't believe that God could command just anything. Jesus reminds us that God is not just any kind of God but a neighbor loving God. And so the kinds of things that are going to please this God are the things we do to show love for our neighbor. If you love your neighbor, you do not steal from him. If you love your neighbor, you do not bear false witness against him.

If you love your neighbor you treat him the way that you would want to be treated. That is how you express your love of neighbor. We obey God's commands because we love God it is true, but we don't just love any God, we love a neighbor loving God, a God who is completely for us, 100 percent for us, and what God commands are actions in which we express our love of neighbor.

You know there are basically two kinds of Christians, I think when it comes to the bible. My father was one type. He was sort of like the comedian W.C. Fields. Any of you remember W.C. Fields? Well, there is a story that says one day W.C. Fields was in a dressing room and someone came in and was surprised to see Mr. Fields flipping through a bible as Fields did not have a reputation for being a religious person, and they said "Mr. Fields what are you doing?" And he said "Loopholes, son, I'm looking for loopholes." Well, that was my dad. I will tell you with all love and affection for my father and his memory, that whenever my dad was going through the bible on his journey of faith, for every passage he came across he would say to himself "Do I believe that or do I not believe that?" And he would do that with the creeds in church as well. Whenever he stood up with the congregation on Sunday morning to say the Apostle's Creed there were certain things he would say and certain things he wouldn't say. That was what faith was all about for him. But then there is another type of person, and this other type of person is quite different from that. He is one who says "You can't do that. You can't say you believe this but you don't believe that. Either every word of the bible's true or none of it's true. It's all or nothing." Well, if you believe that, that is if you believe that every part of the bible is equally true, I don't have a problem with that. I don't have any problem with thinking that every part of the bible is equally true, but do not think that all of it is equally important. Don't think it is all

equally important because Jesus tells us that that isn't so. There is a center to our faith. There is a place where it all hangs together. Love God and love your neighbor because the entire law and the gospels hang on these two commandments. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.