

ONE FOR ALL

Texts on Sunday, June 16, 2013

Acts 17: 16-27; Mark 12: 28-34

When a scribe asks Jesus which commandment is the first of all, think what he is after. Not in this story is he testing Jesus; that was Matthew's theme when telling this story, because Matthew wanted to show how the religious officials feared and hated Jesus. Mark's story is simpler. This scribe admires Jesus. He wants to learn from Jesus how all truth is organized. *What is the first good? What is the purpose of reality?*

This scribe is engaged in the quest that has animated all our forebears. We want to understand the cause and the meaning of our existence. The philosophers of science in ancient Greece peeled back the multitude of sensations trying to comprehend physics through the four elements earth, air, fire, and water. They invented the word "atom" to refer to the smallest indivisible component of any object. Aristotle put the pursuit of happiness at the pinnacle of human motivation. According to Luke, the Greeks in Athens were daily in the quest for unified meaning. We can hardly credit Luke with an open mind as he dismisses all the Athenians and the foreigners there as "spending their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new." Perhaps Paul too thought them ignorant, but nevertheless he praised them for their hungering after an "unknown God." Astrologers of ancient times sought one truth through the stars. In medieval times, the search for the Holy Grail captured the imagination of Europeans seeking that one thing above all. In our day, and for a century now, quantum physicists look for a "unified field theory," a single, elegant explanation for all the forces at work in the physical universe. Every love song, sad or glad, is searching for the true one.

Listen now as the ancient scribe seeks Jesus' answer to the essential riddle, how reality is ordered. He asks, *Which commandment is first of all?* Jesus answers, but he gives two answers. Before we look at the two answers, first look at the two-ness of the answer. If from this sermon you remembered only the fact that Jesus offers two answers to the one question, you could have gold. For truth has always a polar character, a paradoxical give-and-take, this yes-and-no nature, this yin-and-yang, these two wings of the dove. When this *bigger-than-thought / can't-quite-hold-it* feeling comes to you, you can trust you are in the neighborhood of truth. As Jesus says when the scribe receives his answer with joy, *You are not far from the kingdom.*

But to those who come at truth with utter certainty, the spiritually mature are wise to give wide berth. Truth does not make its home in thoughts or doctrines, though it visits there. In order to keep it short enough, a sermon

generally can get at only part of what is true; the other sides of what is the truth—the unlacing today of the shoes snugly tied last week—comes next Sunday. (This is why you have to come to church every Sunday, lest you go from here with words only partly true, and try to hold them as the whole.) But this you can bank: Truth is polar; it has always at least a north and a south, a yes and a no. Truth is a paradox that won't settle down. Jesus is about to deliver a one-two punch for the truth.

Into Torah he reaches for both parts, the first from Deuteronomy, the second from Leviticus. You shall love the One, he says, with all your heart and soul and strength. And you shall love the Many. Jesus' actual word is *love your neighbor*, as well you know; but tell me, Where does neighboring stop? At the edge of your caste, your religion, your color, your class, your nation? *Of course not!* we say, or have learned to say. But only in recent decades has the mind-set of Western civilization stepped confidently into that now-oh-so-obvious response. Why, the atlas at the top of the stairs in my childhood home was sure that the world bore this structure: Near East, Middle East, and Far East. East of what? Us, of course. Which us? The winners, of course. With impunity we battered and slaughtered them by the millions, for they were not our neighbor, and only we knew true God, and bore the burden of imposing Jesus on that dark world. Of such was the neighborhood within the lifetime of anyone middle-aged. Seeing that fact, we must acknowledge that when it comes to learning what Jesus meant, we are but babies babbling his language. *You shall love the One. You shall love the Many.*

Shall you love them you don't like? Are they your neighbor? Are passions and ideas you don't understand your neighbor? Are animals your neighbor? Shall you love them? Which? How? Is the ocean your neighbor, or the prairie, or the purple mountain majesty under which there's yet gas to frack? Is Earth your neighbor? I do not mean to imply that answers to these questions are clear, or that all must hold one opinion. Rather, I hope only to draw from your open heart a feeling response to Jesus' command. *You shall love the One; and you shall love the Many.* The command lies infinitely beyond our strength. Focus on one word, ignoring the other, and both fail. Along this path, if you go it, you will be stretched as if upon the Tree, up and out. You will be humbled, and human. You will never have victory, if others are vanquished; never be right, if others must be wrong. Whence comes the strength for such a journey? From the love of the One, and of the Many, says Jesus.

Last Sunday, we felt after what builds up the unity of the church. We considered the practices of several communities strongly unified "in one heart and one soul," as Luke described the first church. However, last week we did not take up the equally critical question, *What is the purpose of being*

unified? Unity is not necessarily good, after all; Nazis were unified, and cancer cells have one mission. Only a good purpose proves whether unity is worthy. *By their fruits you shall know them.*

What is that purpose which can make the unity of a church fragrant and useful? Jesus says, *Love the One and love the Many*. Whoever commit themselves to these two great commandments will outlive themselves in every imaginable way. Fear will subside, concern for survival, personal or organizational, will fade, for their end will be endless. This is eternal life. “They shall renew their strength, they shall rise up on wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40.31)

But we do not love this cross-shaped path toward the One, which passes through the Many. Already in the 1930s, the Indian philosopher Sri Radhakrishnan had put his finger on the pulse of our times.

For the first time in the history of our planet, its inhabitants have become one whole, each and every part of which is affected by the fortunes of every other. Science and technology, without aiming at this result, have achieved the unity. Economic and political phenomena are increasingly imposing on us the obligation to treat the world as a unit. Currencies are linked, commerce is international, political fortunes are interdependent. And yet the sense that humankind must become a community is still a casual whim, a vague aspiration, not generally accepted as a conscious ideal or an urgent practical necessity moving us to feel the dignity of a common citizenship and the call of a common duty. (Cited by M.K. Gandhi in his book, *Hind Swaraj*)

In a word, through our sciences and technologies, we have found unity, sort of; the world wide web symbolizes the victory. But we—only some of we, of course— have built this techno-tower of Babel, this global mastery of commerce, travel, and communication, by forgetting that we shall love the Many.

Near the end of her book *Encountering God*, Diana Eck configures the demographics of the world’s population in terms of a big village consisting of just 1,000 persons. Of those thousand, for example, 329 would be Christian and 174 Muslim. In terms of wealth, however, 60 individuals would hold half of all the income, and 500 would be hungry. (1990 statistics) Eck observes: “In a household, if 6% of the people had half the wealth, they would not be seen as successful but as unjust . . . To think ecumenically, ecologically, and economically is to think about the world and its interrelations with the same loyalty and care that one brings to the consideration of one’s own household.” You shall love the many as yourself. You shall love the One with all your all. This is hard work. This is work hard enough to be worth it. This demands a revolution in the way we think and in the way we order our household. This is the purpose of the church.

We are not good at transformations. Many think religion is so prone to judgment, division and war to serve the status quo that we all ought to aban-

don ship. But for what vessel? The scientific quest has won us no peace, or love, or community. Traditionalists claim that we ought all head back to the values of a former time, but they have blinded themselves to the evils of those times. In his book, *Why Religion Matters*, Huston Smith shows why traditional religion fails to transform. "When the consequences of belief [pay dividends in] worldly goods, fixing on them turns religion into a service station for self-gratification and churches into health clubs. This is the opposite of the role of authentic religion, which is to de-center the ego, not to pander to its worldly desires." (p. 45)

To de-center the ego. There is the paradox in both loving the One, and loving the Many, for in order to become more at-one, we must become more many. Become one for all. Impossible? Of course! But dare we hold to a purpose which is merely possible, when God promises the kingdom to those who dare all?

How will this church deepen our love for the One and our love for the many? The catalogue of possibilities is too thick for any sermon, yet let us listen to one evocative invitation, offered by a great mind who stood outside our tradition. Somewhere in the tympanum over the main portal into this church is carved a likeness of Albert Einstein. In the early 1930s, he visited here to see that rendering, along with many other figures honored in these walls who were alien to Christianity, yet lovers of the One and the many. At about the same time, he wrote this:

It is very difficult to elucidate this feeling to anyone who does not experience it. The individual feels the vanity of human desires and aims and the nobility and marvelous order which are revealed in nature and in the world of thought. Individual existence strikes him as a sort of prison, and he wants to experience the universe as a single, significant whole. The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling. In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it."

(Cited by Krista Tippett in *Einstein's God*, p. 33)

This is how our work will unfold. Through studies and practices in the sciences, the arts, and the religions, we will become more open to the mystery of God and to the manifestation of the many. This is how we will keep learning to speak the language of Jesus, to love the One, and love the Many. Learn to be one for all.

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