

"The Higher Calling"

October 29, 2017

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 a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

Molly argues with the alarm clock that threatens her with bodily harm if she doesn't obey its morning command to get up and get going on the day. "How could it be 6:00 already?", she asks to the dog who doesn't seem to hear it or care about the alarm. He is snuggled up against her keeping a warm and low profile. Struggling to sit up, she hears the coffee maker in the other room of her apartment hiss and moan in lockstep protest with her own.

The voice starts in almost right away. "How could you have eaten that pizza last night, you fat pig? So much for trying to lose weight. You're so fat! You're so fat that you can't even make it up out of bed." It is her constant companion, her inner voice, judging her,

hating her, condemning her even before the sun rises up over the mountaintops of the distant sky.

"You're not going to get that raise, you know. You are so stupid to trust them to do the right thing. We're going to lose *everything*. We are going to have to move back home, back home to Mother's house. Won't *that* be just grand, Molly Dear, to move back in with Mom so she can tell you all the things I tell you every day! You're such a *screw-up*. You can't do *anything* right. I am ashamed to be you, Molly."

Shaking off this latest lecture delivered to herself, Molly goes through the motions of showering, then drying her hair, and then braiding it. She puts on a non-descript shift-style dress that hides her form as best as it can. She wanders out into the kitchen, takes out a cup that bears the coffee stains of continual use, reaches up again into the cabinet, and pulls down the gin bottle. Taking a little shooter just to steady herself, she turns the cap slowly back onto the bottle, puts it back on the shelf, and then changes her mind.

"What's another little drink going to hurt you?" the voice coaxes her on. "Maybe it will help you put up with him at work today." She takes a bigger swallow, grabs her keys, and heads out the door to her car. The cold air blasts her in the face as soon as she is out the door,

and she remembers suddenly that she has not taken care of her dog. Poochie, it seems, is her only friend. How could she forget him?

"See? There you go again. You're so stupid, Molly. You don't even deserve to have that dog love you. One day you'll come home, and he won't even come to greet you. You'll see."

Molly goes back in the house, calls out to Poochie, and takes him outside to do his business. And then she pets him, coos to him and feeds him. While he is happily scarfing down his breakfast, she gets herself just a little more of the liquid courage. "Thank goodness for Poochie," she thinks. "Be a good boy today," she unnecessarily commands him, for he is always a good boy. Unlike her, Poochie is always good, he's truly a good soul.

I am wondering today these questions: Do you think Jesus ever engaged in negative self-talk? When he got up in the morning, did his inner voice greet him with a monologue of criticism? I can just picture him rising from his mat in the morning, his body creaking and groaning under the weight of the world. Can you almost hear his stomach growling from lack of food? Can you picture his mind weary, exhausted from the stress of being under constant harassment from the

Pharisees, under constant attack from the people who are threatened by his message? Can you feel his burdened spirit, getting heavier and heavier with each passing day of his three-year ministry?

This is the Jesus that greets us this morning in Matthew's Gospel, the Jesus that is nearing the crowning moment of both victory and defeat in this world. So, I am wondering if his inner voice called him a fool. I am wondering if his inner voice encouraged him to give up, to let Rome and Jerusalem have their way. I am wondering if Jesus fought self-doubt and self-judgment.

I am wondering if Jesus loved himself.

In the Gospel passage we just heard Don read, a Pharisee confronts Jesus at a time when Christ's life has reached the crisis point. Jesus, by this time in Matthew's story, has ridden into Jerusalem as the Messiah, seen as the savior for the subjugated peoples of Rome. He has made a prophetic attack against the temple administration, and the scribes and Pharisees have become desperate to silence him. But they have no law to order his execution, and so they look for ways to discredit him so that the people will reject him and he will be a threat no longer.

This exchange about which of the Jewish laws is the Greatest Commandment follows a trick question posed to Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar and another about marriage and resurrection. With each question answered by Jesus, the temple lawyers become more frustrated and more determined to show him up as a charlatan. Jesus though, in the vernacular of the game show, "Survivor," outwits, outplays, and outlasts them. They would vote him off the island, if only they had enough votes. And they are building a case against him as each sun rises and sets.

Jesus needs all of his wits about him. He won't stand the onslaught if his own, human self-talk betrays him, but how could it not? We have evidence that he doubted himself when in Gethsemane he pours out his heart to his silent Father-God, questioning himself, questioning his ability to withstand the coming passion, and questioning his mission and his purpose.

Jesus, the human Jesus, is more like Molly than we might want to think, more like you and like me, more like our doubting selves than we might be willing to admit.

Jacob is getting ready to make the call. He is gathering his courage, planning his words carefully, looking over his notes one last time. Since he left home several years ago, he and his father have only spoken a few times, superficially at best. Jacob has made excuses for why he hasn't come home for holidays and why he has never invited his parents to his--and Steven's-- home.

They don't know about Steven. Jacob has not come out to them, because he knows the conversation will not go well. His parents are conservative protestants, and they don't cotton to that "queer kind of thing." For decades, Jacob suffered in silence as his dad told "faggot" jokes at the bar, as his pastor condemned homosexuals to hellfire in hair-raising, screaming sermons, and as Jacob loved another boy in church so much that his heart hurt at the thought of him, yet he did not dare tell the boy his true feelings.

"You're so *stupid*, Jacob!" his inner voice chides him. "You are just *naïve* if you think for one minute that your father can hear that you are gay. What do you think he's gonna do? Invite you and Steven home for Christmas with open arms and *gay-ly* wrapped packages, that he's going to get all sappy with you and tell you that he loves you unconditionally and that you and Steven are welcome in their home always? Who are you *kidding* anyway? You're not fooling me! I know

you better than *anyone!* Give it up, boy. You're just what the others used to call you—you're a little *sissy*, you're not a real *man!*"

"Uggh! Be quiet!" Jacob hisses into the empty room. "I can *do* this! I *have* to do this! For me and for Steven, too." Jacob gets up from the phone table and starts pacing. He starts losing his courage as he doubts himself. "How can I be true to God if I don't trust God?" he asks, fully engaged now with his inner voice. "To love God with my full heart, soul, mind and strength means being proud of who I am, it means loving myself as the very loving image of God. How can I live in the world if I am afraid to be who I am? "

Jesus tells the Pharisees that there are two Greatest Commandments, but in this passage, I see not *two* greatest commandments, but *three*. The first is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. God is your God, your *personal* God, seeking connection with every fiber of your being. Jesus tells us that the *Lord your God* wants to have your love—your heart. Without love, we are nothing. Without heart, we are inhuman.

Jesus tells us that the *Lord your God* wants to have your spirit—your soul. Not the self-judging, self-demoralizing, self-destructing side of you, but your spirit-self, the spritely self that connects you in peace and tranquility and piety with the divine in you, the *Namaste* in you, the *eudaimonia* in you. The word “*Namaste*” means, “the spirit in me greets the spirit in you.” That is *God* wanting to click with your essence, to bring *God’s* spirit to your doorstep, to be invited inside for a cool, refreshing glass of life-enhancing refreshment. The *eudaimonia* in you is this spirit-self, the one that dares you to live a good story, to love yourself and to love spreading that love outside yourself to a world desperately in need of it.

Jesus tells us that the *Lord your God* wants your love—your heart. *God* also wants your spirit—your emotion. And Jesus tells us that *God* also wants your dedication—your affirmative, well-thought out choice to grasp for the *Great and Wonderful YES* that is *God* in us and us in *God*. *God* wants it *all* from us and for us, that we live our human existence with our hearts, our souls, and our minds in the thick goo messiness, in the thick richness, and in the thick presence of *God*.

That is the *First and Greatest Commandment*. The second, on which also hangs, says *Christ*, the law and the prophets—all the writings, all the should and should nots, all the speeches of the

ancients and the prayers of the supplicants, is to love your neighbor. To love your neighbor, to embrace community, to accept the Namaste in everyone.

Jesus does not say to love just the other Jews in the tribe. He does not say to love all the people just with your coloring. Or your language, customs, and traditions. He doesn't say to love only your neighbors who love you back or your neighbors whom you love already or who it is natural for you to love. He does not say to love just the Jews who can trace their lineage back to Abraham, the pure race of Jews, God's chosen people.

He doesn't say to love your neighbor, but not the one who wanders the streets and talks gibberish to herself. He doesn't say to love your neighbor, but not the one who languishes behind bars as a hopeless drug addict or a murderer or an itinerant thief. He doesn't say to love your neighbor, but not the one *not* your gender who got the job you wanted and who is obviously less qualified than you.

He does not say to love your neighbor, but not the one who doesn't worship as you do, who doesn't pay taxes and their fair share like you do, or who doesn't respect your country's flag as you do. Jesus does not qualify the love of neighbor *at all*.

Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor." The two Great Commandments. Ah, but aren't I missing one? Isn't Molly missing one? Isn't Jacob missing the Third Great Commandment? This one just might be the higher calling, the one that is the pivot point off of which the other two are dependent.

Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all your love, your emotion, and your intention, and love everybody else in the whole wide world, no exceptions, *as you love yourself*. As you love yourself. As you love yourself. What a concept. God wants us to love ourselves. It is only through love of self that we can mirror the love of God for others. It is only through love of self that we get to experience God's love for us.

So why do we engage in this continuing dialogue of self-hatred? I think we adults all do it, some more than others perhaps, but we all do it. I don't know why. Maybe we have become too sophisticated with language for our own good. Does a person who knows no words know no self-deprecation? I know of no baby who engages in self-loathing.

Our inner voice that speaks ill of us has to be *learned*—I don't see that it is innate to the human form. Maybe that is why Jesus says that to know God we must be like children. As we grow old and wise, we grow more and more miserable with ourselves. What a shame, what a

shame. I think of a favorite song of mine with the profound and wistful lyric, "I wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then."

Today, we pray for the Mollies of the world, that she might come to love herself as her God loves her, as her *dog* loves her. Today, we pray for the Jacobs of the world, that he may gain courage and conviction from the knowledge that he is made perfectly in the image of God just as he is, and that he experiences Namaste and eudaimonia in the unconditional love of his beloved Steven.

What is your story of your love affair with God? Can you stop the endless, negative voice in your head long enough to experience oneness with the Great Mystery of God? Can you fill your heart, your spirit, and your brain with God such that there is no room in you any longer for any force that wishes you to live a hateful story? And can you accept that your neighbor—your closest neighbor or the more distant one-- *also* has a burning desire to live a spirit-filled story, *also* may be fighting the demon of self-hatred, and *also* desperately needs to feel that there is hope in the dawning of a new tomorrow?

For all the Mollies and the Jacobs of the world, and for you as well,

May It Be So.