

Here are some lessons from this pandemic.

At the store there was a Big X by the register for me to stand on.....No way was I going to stand on that X. I've seen too many Road Runner cartoons to fall for that one.*** If I had only known in March it would be my last time in a restaurant, I would have ordered dessert.*** I still can't believe people's survival instincts told them to grab toilet paper.*** I never thought the comment 'I wouldn't touch him/her with a 6 foot pole' would become a national policy, but here we are.*** Keep in mind, even during a pandemic, no matter how much chocolate you eat, your earrings will still fit.*** And my favorite: They said a mask and gloves were enough to go to the grocery store. They lied; everybody else had clothes on.

Maybe you heard the story of a young woman who was interviewing for admission into a top business school. The head professor began the interview. "We can ask you 10 easy questions or one really difficult question," he said. "Choose carefully which you want." The young woman thought for a moment, "I would like to answer one really difficult question." The professor scowled. "OK, if that's your choice," he said. "Which comes first, day or night?" The seconds ticked by while the young woman pondered her answer. Then she looked up with a smile, "The day comes first." "And why would you say that?" the professor asked. "Sorry, sir," the young woman said, "But you assured me that I wouldn't need to answer a second question."

Which sets me up for my first point on some background on the gospel. Just like last week, our passage today is about religious leaders asking Jesus difficult questions, not because they wanted real answers, but because they wanted to trap Him. They wanted to make Him look foolish. To make Him less popular with the Jewish people. The question about the greatest commandment is a question designed to stump Jesus. No matter what He answers, He's going to have to neglect some part of God's law. Then the religious leaders can pounce on Him for His ignorance of the Law – or His arrogance in thinking that a mere man can make such important decisions about God's Law. It reminds me of an old New Yorker cartoon that shows a monk sitting at a big desk in a monastery. The monk is filing papers by placing them in one of 3 baskets on his desk. The first basket is marked, "Secular." The second is labeled, "Sacred." The third is labeled "Top Sacred."

The religious leaders are trying to get Jesus to choose which law is 'top sacred' in God's order of righteous living. Matthew tells us they are doing this to test Jesus. And no matter what Jesus answers, He's going to be wrong – or so they thought. But Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead of choosing one important or popular religious law, Jesus takes them all the way back to the very foundation of God's laws, to the One Big Law – the Big Enchilada, the Grand Kahona – the law that is the foundation for everything else. And then He throws in a 2nd one for good measure. LOVE GOD. LOVE NEIGHBOR. Now I COULD end my sermon right there, but to do so would be to cave in to temptation! The temptation to oversimplify the Bible. And you would NEVER want me to give in to temptation now, would you? Besides, you need to have your full homiletical torture!

Jesus is so much smarter than I am. I don't think I had to tell you that, but just in case anyone was wondering! If I had been in Jesus' shoes, I would have answered the religious leaders question with another question: "Why are you so stuck on the Law?" They had elevated love for the Law above both love for God and love for neighbor.

Second, so how do we deal with Jesus' answer? What's the way forward? Jesus was saying here, "If you knew God, you wouldn't have to ask about the greatest commandment." All the Law and the Prophets were intended to point us to the truth of a Loving God. But if we fall in love with the Law instead of the Lord, we miss out on the relationship we are meant to have with God -- and with all those created in God's image. Then we become legalistic and judgmental.

In the late 1970's, Pastor Joe McKeever was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Columbus, Mississippi. A deacon of the church told him of a conversation that he had with a recent visitor to the church. The visitor who attended a recent Sunday service came up to the deacon at the end and said, 'Your pastor is going to hell.' The deacon said, 'May I ask why?' The visitor said, 'His hair is too long.' Remember this was the 1970's. That's the way some people thought back then -- at least those who loved the Law more than they loved the Lord. Some people thought there was something evil about a man with long hair. So the deacon asked a reasonable question: 'And how long should his hair be?' The man answered, "about like mine.'

And as an aside and application of this here. We are voting -- or about to vote. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't be a good Catholic and vote for either candidate. I've actually had people tell me that other Catholics have said to them that they will go to hell for NOT voting for a particular candidate. NO ONE can tell you how to vote. Not even the Pope. Voting is an interior act of conscience, and each person has to arrive at their decision through prayer. No one has the right to invade your conscience. This is church teaching, not my opinion. Read the Bishops' statement on voting -- or the comments of Pope Francis. They agree with one another -- we are not to be single issue voters. We are to look at the whole panoply of issues -- abortion, poverty, capital punishment, treatment of migrants and immigrants, race relations, wealth-poverty gap, the environment, fair taxation, etc, to decide. Don't write to me complaining about being political. This is church teaching -- and guidance -- on how to vote. No one can tell you for whom you must vote. The Church's teaching is simple: "Vote your conscience." PERIOD.

A church visitor was of the opinion that a person's hair length makes them unacceptable to God. Some people think voting one way or the other makes them unacceptable to God. Did God take on human flesh, walk in our shoes, suffer and die on the cross for everyone except shaggy-haired men? Democrats? Republicans? Anyone who disagrees with me? This is how skewed things get when we put the Law first. We end up putting limits on God. We try to limit God's nature and priorities and activities to some level that we can understand. Invariably, we make God in our image. Of course, what made the encounter about hair length doubly absurd was that most religious art back in the 70s showed Jesus with long hair. And what makes the voting for one candidate or another doubly absurd is that we have a practicing Catholic running for President, and Catholics saying you can't vote for him. Go figure. (freely adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2020, p. 18-20)

Third, the best way to show our love for God is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Think about it. It's fairly easy to fake our love for God. We can wear Christian t-shirts, attend Bible studies, post Bible verses to our Instagram account, go to Mass. All these outward activities look like convincing evidence of our love for God.

But loving our neighbor as ourself -- we can't fake that for long. It requires seeing our neighbor as made in the image of God. ALL of them. Whether we like them or not, rich or poor, black or white, gay or straight, illegal or not, immigrant or not, believer or not, Democrat or Republican. Loving neighbor requires self-sacrifice. It takes us out of our comfort zone. It forces us to see the face of Christ in everyone we encounter.

A missionary tells about a prayer he heard an old man pray at a worship service in Africa. The old man prayed, "Lord, let us never move into stone houses." The missionary had no idea what the prayer meant, so he found the man after the service and asked him.

The old man said, "You know Africa. You have seen our country. People here live in huts, and the huts have no doors. That is why your family is my family, and my family is your family. But as soon as you move into a stone house, you build a door. On the door you put a lock, and behind your door you begin to accumulate more and more things. Then you have to spend the rest of your life protecting all that you have acquired." (Tony Campolo, *Stories That Feed Your Soul*, page not given)

A tough story for us to hear. We live in an individualist culture. We expect everyone to mind their own business and take care of their own needs. We are the people living in stone houses. And Jesus is challenging us with this teaching. Do we love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind? Then prove it by moving out of our stone house. Prove it by throwing open our locked door – and locked wallets -- and putting the needs of our neighbors ahead of our own needs. If we love God, then we will love those who are made in God's image. And our love for our neighbors will cause them to experience the presence of God, not legalistic interpretations that suit me but don't fit the big gospel picture.

It's about love. Always about love. Love of God. Love of neighbor. One and the same. Amen.