

When Religion Meets the Road

Matthew 22:34-40

In times of crisis, we need to know where we stand and what we stand for. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were trying to trip him up with theological questions, but he pinned them down about their most basic values and priorities because they had lost sight of their own values – other than watching out for number one!. The question facing each of us is, “So what?” What difference does it make? Where do we stand and what do we stand for? is first and what does that imply?”

They were trying to trip him up – get him to make a mistake for which they would crucify him (figuratively). We see the same process in politics today. Sometimes it's the press and sometimes the other party. They are not so much interested in what you are saying except to the extent that they can use your own words against you. The level of hypocrisy can be overwhelming. As in politics today, so it was in the politics of temple and state in Jesus' day.

In Matthew's 22nd chapter, teams of religious leaders took turns trying to provoke Jesus into making a mistake. First, a group of Pharisee and Herodians asked him about his tax policy. When that failed, leaving the Pharisee to walk away shaking their heads in amazement, some Sadducees challenged him with a question about the nature of the resurrection. Since they did not even believe in a resurrection, Jesus saw through their scheme and quickly sent them away. After that, the Pharisees took another shot at Jesus. One of the religious lawyers asked him what was the greatest commandment? That was an easy question and Jesus answered it straight out. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself. That answer was correct for Jews and also for Christians.

Challenging times come to each of us at some point. Some seem to have more than their fair share of challenging times while others seem to get by with relatively few challenging times. But who is really luckier? Helen Keller faced more challenges than we can imagine. Her story is well known. She was born blind, deaf, and dumb and did so much with few resources. She wrote, “I thank God for my handicaps for through them I have found myself, my work, and my God.”

Jesus was in the midst of a crisis. He had chosen to enter the lion's den, so to speak, and challenge the religious leadership of Israel and the validity of their collaboration with Rome. “Challenging times don't create character,” it has been said. “They reveal character.” The crisis represented by Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the events of what we now call Holy Week, served to clarify for Jesus, his followers, and the religious authority against which Jesus offered non-violent revolution, his nature and his mission.

Jesus chose to use his confrontations with the religious leaders, times when they were trying to trick him, to pin them down. To become who and what we can be requires that we pin ourselves down as to what we value – where we're headed in life.

What crises have touched your life in the past year? What have you lost? Certainly, the currently worldwide economic crisis is touching all of us and most of us have lost money as well as confidence and, perhaps, a sense of security as a result of it. If we remember that a crisis is a clarifying opportunity, what have you learned? What have you gained as a result?

You and I experience times of clarification often. These are not always crises in the negative sense, but times when our perceptions change and we really see life's options in bold relief. The key to such times lies in our being motivated to make significant changes. In religious language, it's when you get convicted leading to getting converted or saved. It's when you realize that what really matters in your life has more to do with your relationship with God and Jesus than with the other things that occupy your time, energy, and life. Author Richard Rohr wrote,

Many Christians have gone through years of religious education and have never surrendered to Jesus as their personal Lord. They may never have even heard the Lordship of Jesus Christ proclaimed except as a string of words among so many other strings of words at church; they may have no idea that it ought to mean something to them personally. God is the only one we can surrender to without losing ourselves.

(from *Great Themes of Scripture*)

Faith does not become real for us without the surrender of our lives to God in the same way Jesus did. Until the God-presence we see in Jesus becomes the God-presence for us and in us. Clarity of thought, the realization of what you want life to be and the path you want to travel. More than that, however, is clarity of commitment and will. Is the great value we espouse the same as Jesus' great value? Are we committed to loving God with all our effort and will? Is it also to love others as well as we love ourselves or will following Jesus just be a hobby or part-time job?

Will I love you and others with the same passion, prayer, and intellect as we bring to finding a way through these tough economic times to make ends meet or to help save my child who is on a fast track to self-destruction, depression or suicide? That is the degree of faith Jesus was talking about, the faith that is necessary to change the world. We cannot keep faith at arms length. Otherwise we'll wind up like the religious leaders with no real direction: protecting turf, playing it safe, and following a path of least resistance. Jesus told us and showed us that it's not enough! What is most important is to love God more than comfort, more than security, and more than the fear of "fear" – and the fear of change.

Jesus told us and showed us that the truth of life is found by pushing through our fear by faith. On the other side, we discover ourselves fully known and completely loved. That possibility was there for the religious leaders, but they believed they had *too much to lose*: status, power, wealth, and even a connection to their tradition. I wonder if they had known that, within 35 years of their conversation with Jesus, their status, power, wealth, and even the temple itself would all be gone courtesy of the Roman army. I wonder if they might have listened to Jesus with different ears.

When we experience loss in our lives that shakes us to the foundation, our very core, in those moments of being shaken or broken we are in a position to hear Jesus' truth with an honesty that is often just not available to us in more stable times. This world is incredibly important. This life we live is so valuable, but not in the sense that we hold onto our little piece of real estate. In twenty, fifty, or eighty years, this life will be over for us. All that's left will be what we've given away or invested in others.

A few years ago, I worked with a church doing a capital campaign. One wealthy couple had stepped up and made a very generous donation to enable the building to go ahead. Within a year of the building's completion, they lost almost everything in the 1987 stock market crash. When they came to church, in the new building their generosity and helped build and surrounded by the community in which they'd invested so deeply, they found strength, comfort, and a renewed passion to resume life. Their investment of money reflected an investment in the community and its mission.

This story illustrates not so much the importance of giving money to church as how crucial it is to invest in what will last. Invest time and effort in prayer and meditation coming to know the God-presence for yourself. Invest time and effort in others to make the world a better place.

There is nothing like a good crisis to clarify thought and motivate action. Our world is facing not only an immediate and extensive economic crisis that is a long way from being over. Beyond that crisis is a global climate change crisis that will challenge us as a human race beyond what most of us have ever experienced. The global crisis in Jesus' day was represented by a Roman army that was poised to flatten any opposition. The crisis in Jerusalem revealed the corruption of the religious leadership and an erosion of the spiritual character of the Jewish people. It's not so different a scenario from what we see today with our leaders and our society.

Jesus called his people, including their leaders, to let go of a failed institution – the temple's collaboration with Rome. He called them to stand up, step up, speak out for, and live their deepest values. They responded by putting him to death, thinking that would solve the problem.

You and I must decide what is vital for us, all of us -- what brings us to life and brings life to us. Admitting what deadens us is a spiritual issue for us as individuals and as a congregation, as a nation, and as a human race. It starts here with individuals and small communities choosing to surrender our lives to the sovereignty of God and all that represents. It involves believing and trusting that to follow Jesus rather than the path of least resistance, is the way of abundance. It is more than enough.

May our lives as individuals and as faith communities burn with the passion of this prayer:

May the God who dances in creation
Who embraces us with human love,

Who shakes our lives with thunder,
Bless us and drive us out with power
To fill the world with her justice. Amen.