

While channel surfing the other night, we came across the wonderful movie, My Big Fat Greek Wedding. We watched it again. It was fun to laugh again at the pitfalls of love and wedding planning. The movie wonderfully points out the pressures that a wedding puts on a couple, on families, on love and relationships. The same week also saw the cartoon, For Better or Worse, deal with the pressures of an upcoming wedding. The bride is pushing the wedding date up so that her grandfather can be there and see her in her grandmother's wedding gown. When the father of the bride was confronted with the possible change in dates his response was something like, "It is okay with me, I don't have anything to do anyway." The last frame showed a shoe (or something) headed in his direction thrown by the mother of the bride! Love, unconditional love, is difficult in the best of circumstances.

We always need to look at the whole text when applying our Scripture text, especially those verses that come before. As we examine our passage today we discover the Herodians and Pharisees are out to trap Jesus. They have some questions ready for him, hoping to trap him, to trip him up. "What about taxes? Is it lawful for us to pay them?" (Lawful under religious law, that is.) And then, what about this woman, she married and her husband died, his brother married her and he died. This was repeated for all seven brothers. "Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" Jesus answers both of these questions with finesse and impresses a Scribe listening to the dialogue.

Now, he has a question. I see this not as an attempt to trap Jesus, but as one of those authentic questions asked by one who wanted to truly hear Jesus' response: "What is the greatest commandment?" The Scribe has the one he thinks is most important but what does this young rabbi think. Jesus answers it correctly, quoting from Deuteronomy 6. The number one commandment is to love God with all our being. Let all our love flow toward God. Love of God should be the priority of our lives. Every other Law is secondary to this.

The Scribe would have been delighted with this response, but Jesus adds an addendum, the second is: Love your neighbor as yourself. I wondered why Jesus added this to this question. Then I realized that how we love God is played out or demonstrated in how we love our neighbor. In loving God we love our neighbor. If we love our neighbor then we love God. It is easy to say we love God – but how do we demonstrate it. Jesus tells us--Simple, love your neighbor.

The Scribe agrees, "You have answered well." Jesus responds: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." How far is far? Why this response from Jesus?

My thinking on this is the Scribe knew the right answer but perhaps was not letting the answer play out in his life. I mean, we all know what we should do, right? A little while from now we will all be eating lunch and most of us will eat something that is not good for us. We know what we should do, but. We know what our bad habits are, but we keep on doing them. We know we should vote but we often don't. Just before we left California one of the local cities had an election and less than 9 per cent of the registered voters voted. We know we should love our neighbors but when they play the stereo loud at 3 a.m. they become very difficult to love.

The question is not if we know what to do but whether or not we do it. There are so many other pressures on our lives. We could make a list of the things we know we

should have done but never did. We fall short and there are days when we too, “are not far from the kingdom of God.”

The Scribe knew the Law. He agreed with the answer Jesus gave. Yet, something was lacking, something was keeping him from entering fully into the Kingdom of God. Was he truly loving his neighbor as he loved himself? Did his love for God play out in his relationships with those around him? With his neighbors?

When we begin to express our love for God in the way we treat others our whole world opens to new and wonderful experiences. Our world is opened to forgiveness, hope and possibilities we never imagined. When loving and caring become a part of our lives we discover new friendships and relationships. When we change our focus from hate to love we begin to love God—for no one can love God and hate another (Matthew 5:43ff; I John 3:11ff).

They were trying to trap Jesus. They were trying to define life by the way they lived out the Law. What about paying taxes? What about marriage in heaven? What about this or that? What are the limits by which we live our lives? Even Peter wanted to know how many times he should forgive someone (Matthew 18:21). Give a number; help us define what it means to forgive in a measurable way. We want to know what we are supposed to do and how we are supposed to do it. I mean, is it okay to watch Baywatch?

Jesus responds that we are to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. We are to put first things first. Jesus gives simple and direct instructions on how to love God. One should flow into the other – love God=love neighbor. Loving your neighbor is a way for the love you have for God to play out in this life. Stop thinking about it and start living it.

Found two illustrations in the third edition of Chicken Soup for the Soul. They are not perfect but both speak to the need for us to love God and then demonstrate that love in relationship with others.

The first is entitled: Compassion in the Eyes.

It was a bitter cold evening in northern Virginia many years ago. The old man's beard was glazed by winter's frost while he waited for a ride across the river. The wait seemed endless. His body became numb and stiff from the frigid north wind.

He heard the faint steady rhythm of approaching hooves galloping along the frozen path. Anxiously, he watched as several horsemen rounded the bend. He let the first one pass by without an effort to get his attention. Then another passed by, and another. Finally, the last rider neared the spot where the old man sat like a snow statue. As this one drew near, the old man caught the rider's eye and said, "Sir, would you mind giving an old man a ride to the other side? There doesn't appear to be a passageway by foot."

Reining his horse, the rider replied, "Sure thing. Hop aboard." Seeing the old man was unable to lift his half-frozen body from the ground, the horseman dismounted and helped the old man onto the horse. The horseman took the old man not just across the river, but to his destination, which was just a few miles away.

As they neared the tiny but cozy cottage, the horseman's curiosity caused him to inquire, "Sir, I noticed that you let several other riders pass by without making an effort to secure a ride. Then I came up and you immediately asked me for a ride. I'm curious why, on such a bitter winter

night, you would wait and ask the last rider. What if I had refused and left you there?"

The old man lowered himself slowly down from the horse, looked the rider straight in the eyes, and replied, "I've been around these here parts for some time. I reckon I know people pretty good." The old-timer continued, "I looked into the eyes of the other riders and immediately saw there was no concern for my situation. It would have been useless even to ask them for a ride. But when I looked into your eyes, kindness and compassion were evident. I knew, then and there, that your gentle spirit would welcome the opportunity to give me assistance in my time of need."

Those heartwarming comments touched the horseman deeply. "I'm most grateful for what you have said," he told the old man. "May I never get too busy in my own affairs that I fail to respond to the needs of others with kindness and compassion."

With that, Thomas Jefferson turned his horse around and made his way back to the White House.

The second may stretch my point a little but think about it this afternoon: An Afternoon in the Park.

There once was a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer and started his journey.

When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry, so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. One again she smiled at him. The boy was delighted!

They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few stops, he turned around, ran back to the old woman and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face.

She asked him, "What did you do today, that made you so happy."

He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? She's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen."

Meanwhile, the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home.

Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face and he asked, "Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?"

She replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." But before her son responded, she added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."

Canfield, Jack & Hansen, Mark Victor, *A 3rd Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Heath Communications, Deerfield, FL – (p.43/44 Anonymous, From Brian Cavanaugh's *The Sower's Seeds*, p.67.68, Julie A. Manhan)