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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 26)  
October 31, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Mark 12:28-34

The so-called Socratic method, which is attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, is a way of teaching based on a series of questions and answers. The teacher will, for example, ask, "What is the origin of the Statue of Liberty?", to which the student would answer, "It was a gift to the United States from France." It is an effective -- if intimidating -- method of teaching, because the student must have the correct answer ready on demand. In occupations requiring a person to think and respond quickly -- like those in the legal or medical field -- a certain amount of conditioning by way of the Socratic method is helpful. This method, after all, was famously used by Charles Kingsfield, a crusty law school professor played by John Houseman in the 1973 film The Paper Chase. The lesson one learned, if anything, was that, if you were going to be in Professor Kingsfield's class, you had better be prepared!

I took a couple pre-law courses in college, where an unprepared student would occasionally be told by the professor, "Your client loses." That got everyone's attention...

Of course, the Socratic method is not exclusive to ancient Greece or law schools; in fact, we discover it being used over centuries of religious instruction (Christian catechesis, especially), and

even by Jesus himself. Jesus would've encountered it, most notably, among the rabbis with whom he studied. Throughout his ministry, as well, he encountered it -- albeit usually in the form of a smart aleck's "gotcha" question, often used against him in accusations of false teaching and the like.

In this morning's Gospel text, there is an adversarial dynamic, as the scribe who asks Jesus a question wants to see if this hotshot really knows his stuff. The text mentions that he was already doing pretty well, but the scribe, I think, was looking for that "gotcha" moment. The scribe thinks that he can really drop a bomb on Jesus with his question -- "Which commandment is the first of all?" (Mark 12:28c).

In this case, Jesus gets it right, even from the perspective of his adversaries; he says, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'" (Mark 12:29-30). This is actually a quotation of Deuteronomy 6:4, and is known by Jewish people as the Shema, which they pray regularly.

But Jesus doesn't stop there; he adds, "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:31). As we know, the scribe was impressed, which, we can gather, doesn't happen very often! Bear in mind, too, that the Jewish faith had -- and still has -- 613

commandments, covering all manners of habit, hygiene, and behavior, so for Jesus to sift through all of that and identify the one or two things that really matter is quite impressive, indeed.

But I should also mention how Jesus effectively neutralizes what could've become an even more adversarial situation. One gets the impression that this scene -- initially, at least -- was an "us" versus "them" sort of dynamic. And, much like today, people were quick to identify folks with whom they're inclined to disagree and then pick fights with them; here, the scribe represented the "us" and Jesus represented the "them." But Jesus didn't fall into the trap of being the "them." By the answer he gave to the scribe, he made everyone the "we." That's what agreement does; it points to the things we share in common, rather than accentuate our opportunities for disagreement. The minutiae of habit, hygiene, and behavior aren't that important, but yet can cause some of the biggest fights. However, when we look at the big picture, which Jesus does, the minutiae fall away. The scribe himself put it best: "This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mark 12:33c).

Of course, there were still plenty of people who disagreed with Jesus' big picture approach, and wanted to corner him at every opportunity. And there are people like that to this day. But we need to resist the temptation to be like that. Therefore, pray always that we may see the big picture and not allow ourselves to be divided by petty differences and trivial disagreements. Pray,

as well, that the command to love may take root in our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Perhaps, then, when we love our neighbors, we won't be so inclined to pick fights with them. Think of this call as our opportunity to build and strengthen relationships rooted in respect and trust, which is nothing other than rooting them in Christ himself! When Christ is between us, his love will be between us, as well. If Christ can give his life for us, surely we can offer his love to our neighbor.

Know, too, that your Rector and Vestry take this call very seriously and want to ensure that St. Anne's remains a "we" and doesn't become an "us" and "them." Therefore, you should be expecting prior to the end of the year a phone call from a Vestry member and a handwritten note from your Rector. It may not sound like much, but, having seen our community devastated by a pandemic, we need to reestablish the sorts of connections upon which our community is based. It is based on the things we share in common, like worship, fellowship, and indeed Christ himself. May we continue to see the big picture especially when the world around us lures us into the accentuation of difference and disagreement.

And unlike the pressure to produce the right answer that the Socratic method imposes, we are now under no pressure to produce the right answer...because Jesus gives it to us right here. He gives it to us in the words, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," and in the words, "Love your neighbor as your-

self." Be that person who is so shaped by the love of God and neighbor that there is no other choice for you than to see a "we" rather than an "us" and "them." Basically, that's what it means to love. In this life, when you are wholly committed to communion with your God and to unity with your neighbor, you allow God to do his work, which is healing wounds, reconciling differences, and building bridges. These are the things, after all, that God did in giving us his Son Jesus Christ. As the Body of Christ in the world, you, too, go out to heal, to reconcile, and to build -- but only with God's help.

So, with God's help, you now can be the sort of influence on our church and world that creates the "we" that is so desperately needed today. Take heart, because Christ has given us the answer.

Amen.