

Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost October 25, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A, Proper 25: Exodus 22:21–27; Psalm 1; Matthew 22:34–46

Last Sunday, the question for Jesus was, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”¹ Today, the story continues. Jesus and his disciples are still in the temple. The crowds include scribes, Pharisees, and Jesus’ disciples. The next question for Jesus is, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”² The law in question, of course, is the Torah, the Law of Moses. In it are 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions.³ Of course, there have been discussions for thousands of years about understanding and the relative importance of 613 different commandments.

In the Fourth Book of the Maccabees, a text from the period of the Second Temple, before its destruction thirty-some years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, we read, “Do not suppose that it would be a petty sin if we were to eat defiling food; to transgress the law in

¹ Matthew 22:17.

² Matthew 22:36.

³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28 A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 81.

matters either small or great is of equal seriousness, for in either case the law is equally despised.”⁴

This question is posed to Jesus in Mark as, “Which commandment is the first of all?,” in Luke as, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?,” and in Matthew, as we heard, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?”⁵

In Mark, the questioner is a scribe who asks the question because he has heard wisdom in Jesus’ words. He responds to Jesus’ answer, “You are right teacher.” Jesus then says, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”⁶

Luke uses the question in a different context. It comes as Jesus and his disciples begin their journey to Jerusalem. Jesus responds to a lawyer by asking him, “What do you read in the law?” He answers with words from Deuteronomy, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” When Jesus responds, “Do this and you shall live,” he then asks, “Who is my

⁴ 4 Maccabees 5:19–21.

⁵ Mark 12:28; Luke 10:25; Matthew 22:36.

⁶ Mark 12:28–34.

neighbor?” Jesus responds with the Parable of the Good Samaritan.⁷

Professor Ulrich Luz writes that the Gospel According to Matthew proclaims a new understanding of God and a new meaning of the word “neighbor” for Jesus’ followers.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons [and daughters] of your Father who is in heaven . . . For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? . . . And if you salute only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? . . . You, therefore, must be complete, as your heavenly Father is complete.”⁸ Luz writes, “For [Matthew’s readers] the love of God and the love of neighbor are closely related from the very beginning.”⁹

In preparing the new lectionary for the Prayer Book, we followed the 1969 Roman Catholic *Lectionary for Mass* in selecting the lesson paired with today’s gospel reading. In that same chapter in Exodus, we read, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for

⁷ Luke 10:25–37.

⁸ My translation. Matthew 5:43–48.

⁹ Ibid.

you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”¹⁰ Before moving on to Jesus' question, I remind you that on the Last Sunday after Pentecost, the Feast of Christ the King, we will hear the sheep say to the king, “ ‘When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? . . . the king will answer . . . ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.’ ”¹¹ It is a question that arises for most of us every day when we walk on our city streets.

Now, the question about David's Son appears in Mark, Matthew, and Luke.¹² It arises from the first verse of Psalm 110, labeled “A Psalm of David.” It begins, “The LORD said to my Lord sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”

In Hebrew, the first use of “LORD” is the sacred and unspoken name of God. In our Bibles and Prayer Books, the last three letters are not in lower case but small caps. The second “Lord” does not have small caps. Its English meaning is owner, master, ruler, or noble lord. New Testament Greek, however, uses the same word in both places: *kyrios*. In the psalm, David

¹⁰ Exodus 22:21.

¹¹ My translation after the NRSV. Matthew 25:31–46.

¹² Mark 12:35–37a; Matthew 22:41–46; Luke 20:40–41.

calls his son his Lord. So what does Matthew mean when he uses *kyrios*? I'm not sure how to answer. Duke Divinity School Professor C. Kavin Rowe argues that when Mary visits Elizabeth and Elizabeth says to Mary, "Why is this granted me, that the mother of my *Kypíou* should come to me?", *Kypíou* should be understood as the sacred name.¹³ Perhaps it's essential for the church's development that there could be broader, richer paths of understanding.

Now, if you know who Jesus is, there's no problem for you. It is a problem if you and I do not recognize the Messiah when he is in our lives and the lives of all. How we treat others, respect others, relate the stranger, family, and friend all matters. It's the foundational conviction of the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹⁴ Daily, may we in word and deed strive to be not far from the kingdom of God.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹³ C. Kavin Rowe, "Luke and the Trinity: An Essay in Ecclesial Biblical Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56 (2003), 1–26.

¹⁴ Luz, 80, 81 n.46, 87.