

“Practicing Pentecost: After Questions”

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Mark 12:28-34

“And nobody dared to ask him anymore questions.”

I know what you are thinking? Why? Had curiosity run its course? Was Jesus becoming uninteresting? Did his religious opponents, who controlled how and by whom the sacred scriptures would be read and taught, lose interest in Jesus? And if so, was it because he showed signs of getting with the program and holding the party line? If the questions stopped, I doubt that it was because Jesus suddenly got boring. In fact, it seems that his celebrity was only expanding. And it is rather clear that Jesus put a premium on “policy” over “party” because he identified mostly with the poor. We know that he was disgusted with prideful, peacock-like leadership that bordered on personal, religious and national narcissism. He was fixated on a deeper orthodoxy that he believed flowed from the heart of God, an uncommon compassion based on radical hospitality for outsiders and leadership marked with humility and sacrifice.

To the degree that the questions stopped, perhaps they stopped because of the growing clarity in his teaching, a clarity that flowed from his uncommon life. From today’s reading, we learn there is no need for questions once we are clear about what we should be doing. And this is what we know: we are to love God, love neighbor and love self. Every word is of equal importance.

First, a word of caution. Whenever we speak of loving God, neighbor and self as three separate activities we run the risk of misunderstanding what love is and how it works. Love, like life, itself, cannot be separated from itself; love is so all-encompassing that even its apparent opposite, say, hate, is essentially only the momentary absence of love.

It obviously doesn’t go without saying, because here we are talking about it again, but it is without question: Love shines a very unflattering light on any word, act or gesture of superiority.

Now, I suspect we have all looked down our noses at someone doing something we find offensive; that is an “air” of superiority. In low doses, an air of superiority can be tolerated like a foul but passing odor. But we are so easily offended, these days. Are you noticing the stench? Is it because our noses are growing upward and becoming more pointed? I’m not sure how the face of America should be described, beautifully diverse as a field of wild flowers in bloom, but for every face there is a nose. May God heal our noses, yours and mine and others, those especially in positions of power and authority. The growing length of Pinocchio’s nose was trouble enough. Think what damage he could have done had it had the point of a sword. Will you pray with me, “God, heal my pointy nose. Help me to be truthful and kind in all I do and say.”

But we have passed the occasional and indiscreet air of superiority. We have passed the point of putting out a few air fresheners in the hopes of wicking the pollution that now

saturates our airways. We must return to the essential action and order of compassion that flows from the center of all things, a compassion that seeks to form our circumference. We are to love God. We are to love neighbor. We are to love self. Every act and air, word and deed must be free of the sin of superiority: individual superiority, regional, national superiority, religious and cultural superiority, language, race, color, creed, orientation superiority.

Why talk about this in here? Because everyone of us has been treated as special. From places of privilege, what we say and do matters and carries weight, and because of that, it is up to us to be circumspect and careful with our words and actions. The fact that we are special in the eyes of some gives us a unique opportunity to be clear and intentional about the truth: we are not more deserving; we are simply joyful in our serving. You are not special, I am not special, not as in more deserving. In Christ, we are being called to joyfully do our part of the serving.

So? So what? So, until further notice, that is, until our public and private discourse changes, until our denominational and political name calling ends, until the reporting of the news, until the talking points of commentators, until guns and bombs are no longer directed toward innocent people – until further notice – let us associated with First Church stop using words that project superiority. And when we act as though we are superior, let's gently ask each other to stop.

Examples? Anything specific, pastor? Every Jew I know bristles when they hear Christians refer to themselves as the New Israel. And, of course, you know how this plays out: since we have been a New Covenant, we must be God's new people. Oh, the weight of the simple word "new." This one word, for 2,000 years, has fueled a "replacement theology" that leads to "supersessionism. The sin of superiority. The word "new" thrives on there being an "old," old as no longer necessary. Sure, if you are a recent graft into the stump of Jesse, of course you may feel special, but your new life in Christ is in no way the replacement of somebody else's life. You feeling special is not the un-special-ling of your neighbor.

We don't need to say that Jesus is the New Moses, even if we are excited about the Law of Love that Jesus preferred to talk about. Dare I continue this line of thinking? Of course, you may love the gospels and letters found in your bible, but you do not have to refer to them as the New Testament. Just because I'm convinced that God wants me to read my bible and not somebody else's, it doesn't mean that my bible is superior. But even if you don't agree with me, and choose to feel differently about your bible, will you join me in refraining from using words that add to the confusion, words that can lead some people to commit hateful acts?

One rabbi I read this past week suggests that anti-Semitism is alive and well because of five statements, equally false and cleverly allowed to surface from time to time; he calls them the "Big Five." Here they are – Jews are different. Jews killed Jesus. Jews are

greedy. Jews are an inferior race holding back scientific and human advancement. Jews are Western imperialists.

Can I write Rabbi Evan Moffic and tell him that we at First Church pledge never to restate those false and harmful statements? Can I tell Suzanne DeBey, an active leader in our local Jewish community, that we at First Church know about the “Big Five,” and that we do not even insinuate that they are true? I’m asking us to refrain from certain words not to make us “politically correct.” There’s hardly anything correct about our discourse in this country. Being correct left the house just before being considerate exited. And sadly, being considerate stopped just after being accurate fled. I’m asking us to move away from words, actions and airs of superiority in response to Jesus’ invitation to love. We love. We love not because we are special, but because love is the only game in town. When love leaves, it will be game over.

I want to end by inviting us to picture a pendulum. Close your eyes for just 40 seconds as I walk us through this simple meditation. Picture a pendulum. See it swing, with ease and direction. Watch it move back and forth. Place the word “God” on the left, “neighbor” in the middle, and “self” on the right. Observe the swing, sense the sweep. God...neighbor...self, self...neighbor...God. At the extreme end of each swing, when we are loving God and when we are loving self, notice that we are the farthest away from the “neighbor” in the middle. Each swing can take us way out, way out, which can lead to isolation; it is the nature of a pendulum.

But, blessedly, thank God, on the way back from either end, the pendulum centers itself and reaches its richest depth. Love of neighbor forms the connective edges that link each end to the center. Loving neighbor is, quite literally, the first thing we do and the last thing we do when we are busy loving God; loving neighbor is the first and last thing we do when we are loving self.

People of First Church, be the pendulum you are called to be. I’ll strive to be the pendulum I am called to be. There is no higher calling. Amen.