

## JESUS, THE GREAT DEBATER

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**Text: Matthew 22:34–40**

We are in the season of debates and hearings. The political debates have been rather disappointing because they have not been true exercises in debate but rather the art of interruption. Since we record our services on Thursday morning, I do not know how the one scheduled for Thursday evening has gone. There was some talk of muting one speaker's microphone so we could hear what the other has to say. By the time you see this service, you will know how that went.

In our scripture, we find Jesus surrounded by the Pharisees and the Sadducees, people with a certain authority in ancient Palestine, who were wanting to debate with him. Maybe we do not think of Jesus as a debater, but there are many stories in our Gospels where people, often religious leaders, approached Jesus to debate an issue. This morning we have such a situation. Apparently, Jesus had just won the last debate with the Sadducees, and now the Pharisees were taking a turn.

Despite their differences, Jesus would have agreed with both religious groups on many points of theology. Like the Sadducees, Jesus would have been concerned about being faithful to God. Like the Pharisees, Jesus would have had a certain amount of respect for the customs and laws of Judaism. You might remember the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus said that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. But Jesus' actions were disturbing, and the Pharisees wanted to prove to the listeners that he was a charlatan, not the person he said he was.

So, a lawyer who was a Pharisee asked this question, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" This is a great question for those of us who want to practice our faith; those of us who want to get it right; those of us who want to make sure we are putting our energy into the right things. It's a great question.

In a recent issue of *Christian Century*, Audrey West, Professor at Moravian Theological Seminary, tells the story about watching a video about archery. It begins with a young man tossing a six-inch wooden disk into the air. Seconds later an arrow speeds its way into the disk, shattering it. A high-speed camera, replayed in slow motion, captures the arrow's impact at nearly dead center in the disk. The next target is a two-and-a-half-inch ball. Again, the man tosses it in the air, and the arrow hits it on center. The archer does it three more times, each time with a smaller target: a golf ball, a Life Savers candy and finally an aspirin tablet. In each case the arrow goes straight to the mark, even when the target is no larger than the diameter of the tip of the arrow. When the archer is asked how it is possible to shoot so accurately using a handmade bow, especially when the target is so small, the archer relies, "The center of an aspirin is exactly the same size as the center of a beach ball. Always aim for the center." *Always aim for the center.* West goes on to say that this is what Jesus is doing with his answer to the Lawyer's question. "[Jesus] aims for the center, straight into the heart of their shared sacred scriptures."

How well we know these words: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall

love your neighbor as yourself.” In other words, if you want to know how to love God, we must love our neighbor. To love our neighbors is to love God. But we still find it challenging, maybe even impossible, don’t we? I wonder if we even take it seriously.

Earlier you heard the poem “Kindness” by Naomi Shihab Nye. I think she’s on to something. Maybe it’s too hard or too complicated to love God or our neighbor, but, at the very least, we can practice kindness. If we can be kind to our neighbor, in that action, we will show our love for God.

Shihab Nye’s poem has these incredible words, “Before you can know the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you.” *The tender gravity of kindness*: Yes, in all our righteous anger and pursuit of justice, it is kindness that must ground us, pull us back to earth. We must experience what the other has experienced to know this kindness. We must travel where an asylum seeker sits in a cell by the border. We must travel where a child is separated and lost from their parents. We must travel where a black man lies with a knee on his neck. We must travel to the neighbor who has a political sign you want to tear down. The tender gravity of kindness. Yes, in all our righteous anger and pursuit of justice, it is kindness that must ground us.

We don’t know what is going to happen in the new few weeks. But we can work on how we will react. Dear friends of mine, Pert and Kathy, were speaking to family members about their concerns for the current state of the world. Maybe this has happened to you too. Their family members expressed fear of potential violence after the election. They are concerned about rising taxes and loss of medical care. They fear the loss of democracy. As the conversation unfolded and the more they talked, they slowly began to realize they were on opposite sides of the political debate. They are supporting very different candidates. In the end they realized they shared one thing: fear. Fear that life as we know it will be dramatically and forever changed. I have heard many of you express your fears about the future, about the election and its implication for our future.

Cornel West wrote a book titled *Race Matters*, and in it he writes, “In these downbeat times, we need as much hope and courage as we do vision and analysis; we must accent the best of each other even as we point out the vicious effects of our racial divide and pernicious consequences of our maldistribution of wealth and power. We simply cannot enter the twenty-first century at each other’s throats, even as we acknowledge the weighty forces of racism, patriarchy, economic inequality, homophobia, and ecological abuse on our necks. We are at a crucial crossroad in the history of this nation—and we either hang together by combating these forces that divide and degrade us or we hang separately. Do we have the intelligence, humor, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect, and will to meet the challenge? Time will tell. None of us alone can save the nation or world. But each of us can make a positive difference if we commit ourselves to do so.” West wrote this in 1993. We haven’t done very well.

I don’t know how this election will come out. I can’t predict the future, and I’ve learned not to trust polls, but this much I do know: I know that responding with kindness is more powerful than engaging fear. Our own personal feelings of fear can sweep over us like a tsunami and cause us to react without thinking or consulting our more evolved and loving self. But if we have prepared ourselves to react with kindness and love, will not the impact be even greater? As Christians, as people who follow the teachings of Jesus, we have the responsibility to respond with love or, at the very least, with kindness.

You have likely seen this post by Sheri Eckert on Facebook, and I may have shared it before, but it’s worth repeating: “Be that one. The one who forgives when a deep offense has been committed. The one who loves when no one else does. The one who gives kindness to those who are mean. Be the one who looks past an insult, *instead* seeing the pain that motivated it. Be the one who shines Light upon those who sit in the utter darkness. Because the impact of being that one runs far and wide. It brings healing to the wounded, joy to the sad, and hope to those in despair. Be that one.”

But don't misunderstand me, one can respond with love and kindness and still stand for justice and speak for truth and march for peace. One can be a peace and justice activist and still be kind. Be that one. May it be so. Amen.