

“One Last Thing”

Rev. David Gregory

October 16, 2022

19th Sunday after Pentecost



The Pharisees Question Jesus
James Tissot

Readings

Matthew 22:34-40

from the New Revised Standard Version

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said to him, “‘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.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

“Messenger”

a poem by Mary Oliver from her collection entitled *Thirst*

My work is loving the world,
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.
Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still half-perfect?
Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,
which is gratitude,
to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy to the moth and the wren,
to the sleepy dug-up clam, telling them all,
over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

You have no doubt noticed that I quote my grandmother a lot. She was a fountain of quips and quotes, snippets of phrases, bits of poetry. For a Quaker woman, she talked *a lot*, so much so that even four decades after her death I continue to hear her voice in my head. The phrase that resonates today is one she often said with a sigh: "Time marches on!" I say it today with my own sigh. These last few weeks have literally flown by, and now we find ourselves at a tender moment where we get to celebrate the work we have done together, to mark the transition to something new, and to open ourselves to the next wave that rises beneath us to carry us all onto the next shoreline of our lives.

But before that happens, I have this one last thing to say, and I need Jesus and Mary Oliver to help me say it. If I can give you the one word that contains every idea, every sentence, every experience of the last five years, it is the word *love*. That's it; that's all of it. It's everything; it's the only thing. There is only love.

I think this is what Jesus might have been getting at when faced with a complex religious and cultural landscape: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots, the peasants in the countryside, the tax collectors and Samaritans, the colluders with the Romans, the prostitutes, the wealthy, the poor fishermen. Within this swirling sea of humanity were competing agendas, and today's gospel expresses one of them. There was one among the Pharisees, a legal expert, who wanted to trip Jesus up, to discredit what he was saying, but as the gospel writers like to show us often, Jesus had a way of silencing his critics, but not by arguing them into a corner with complex ideas. The power of his words was in their simplicity. Within the system of the Mosaic Law, he had a way of getting right to the core of everything by reminding his fellow Jews that there was really just one thing to think about. Which is the most important piece of the Law of Moses? If this Pharisee could get Jesus to say what his favorite commandment was, he could accuse him of ignoring the others, for the Law stood as a monolith in which every word, every rule, every jot and tittle meant something vital to the identity of the Jews. And from within this predicament is where Jesus always shines. His answer to the Pharisee was this:

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. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

What can one say in response to that? Here is a Pharisee who has devoted his life to the exacting tradition of following every rule and regulation, and Jesus says, "If you love God with all your heart soul and mind," and "if you love your neighbor as yourself," it does not render the rules and regulations null and void, it simply transcends them. Actions that are directed from a heart filled with love don't need external rules, because they come from an internal place, what Jeremiah called the "law of God written on the heart." Love is doing the right thing, not because you have to, but because you want to. You can't not.

Love is the ultimate guiding force of the universe; it empowers; it animates; it transcends. God, you see, is Love. It's as simple and as deep as that. And this is why Mary Oliver can say that there is only one piece of work for her to do, and that "work" is loving the world. Get that and you get it all.

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Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.*

We can look around us at a world that seems to be in need of fixing – a bunch of us going around in old boots. It reminds me of an October many years ago in Provincetown when a shopkeeper pointed across the street at a woman trudging down the road in a pair of old boots, and he said, “Are you familiar with Mary Oliver? That’s her!” I had heard of Mary Oliver, but hadn’t yet discovered the depths of her, and I still have this image of her trudging down the quiet end of Commercial Street, perhaps toward home. I did not see her face; I only saw her gait, her hair askew, a scarf blowing in a tail behind her. Since her passing from this life, I’ve only come to know her better, and she has taught me what it is to stay at the heart of things, to stay away from the systems of power created by humans, and to go deeply into the simplicity of the world around me ... to find my one piece of work to do, that of loving the world that I find here. If I can do that, all the rest will come to me. If I can truly love, I’ll have fulfilled my purpose, I will have found my path, I will have done what I came here to do.

If I can love with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, I will have made sense of the religions of the world, I will have ceased to worry about who is right and who is wrong, and I will have come to a place where I can see Divine Source in everyone I meet. I will have less need to control, to correct, to corral others into my own way of thinking and being, and I will be able simply to invite others into this world of love that is God, for God is Love.

And so now we ride this next wave. Five years ago this month, as I sat in a restaurant on the Upper East Side of Manhattan across a table from Carolyn Long, I could feel the wave coming. Yet, I held the call to be your minister with an open hand, and as I said to her that day, it was "this or something better." In other words, CCC set a standard that eclipsed all other places we might have considered. More accurately, it was "If it's not this, then I don't know what is!" And so we had our "let go and let God" moment that brought us to this shore.

The thing about waves is that they never stop. They can be large or small, but they keep coming. This particular one is carrying us to different shores. As I have been watching Ann and Bill, I see the wave rising beneath them as they have come forward with their many gifts for ministry in this season. And there's yet another wave out there in the distance already moving your future minister into place. This is how something as big as an ocean moves. We don't make these things happen. They are the province of Divine Love. We tune to them. We observe them. We work in concert with the Sacred, and watch in awe as Spirit moves.

This time with you has changed our lives, and we have found such joy in this journey. We jumped on to this slow-moving train to see where it would take us, and the ride has been beautiful. Thank you for being on it with us. We'll depart at the next station, but we know the train will keep moving, and I can hardly wait to see where it takes you next!



*Bohemian Crossing**
Shirley Manfredi