
Who's Number One?

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 25, Year A

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" (Matthew 22:34-36)

This morning, I now present to you the Top Ten!

The ten greatest moments in sermon history! After all, ESPN presents its top ten sports highlights every morning. Magazines publish their top ten restaurants in town, top ten doctors, top ten stores, top ten places to live.

Do those lists get your attention? Of course they do! A listing of the top possibilities, leading up to a grand number one, seem to get my attention, too. Is my favorite one of their favorites? Who is Number One? Who's Number One?!

And, so: "Top Ten Moments in Sermon History!"

Well, I am joking. I am presenting a parody the practice. The truth is that I do not like Top Ten lists. And they are everywhere these days, as media outlets and speakers try to get our attention. The best places to live, the best restaurants, the top ten writers, even the top ten preachers, for that matter.

I do not like ranking things, and people, that are perfectly good, on their own. Those lists set up good organizations, and good people, against each other; and they leave me feeling like I am lacking something if I am not living in the very best part of town.

My preference is to applaud the good work, the good service, of so many different places to live, and restaurants, and writers, and preachers. We are missing something important in life, if we think we must participate in the best all the time.

Now, I must admit that one of the reasons I have come to this conclusion is that, since 1966, I have been an Atlanta Braves baseball fan. I have learned the wonderful difference, and sometimes the agonizing difference between steady, good baseball, beautiful baseball day in and day out, --between that--and winning the world series so that a team can be called the best.

The best, the greatest, are not always those who somehow win the grandest contests: the best are those who show up every day, day in and day out, with goodness and excellence.

Yes, I realize that we are all drawn to contests. I get that. Even scholars and religious people are drawn to contests. What is the best? What is the greatest?

So it was in the time of Jesus! Asking such questions of rising rabbis, popular new stars, was a practice even in the time of Jesus. For the past several Sundays, we have been reading in the Gospel of Matthew about some stiff and confrontive questions to Jesus: Is it permissible to pay taxes to the emperor or not? Is there such a thing as resurrection?

And today's question continues the testing: Which is the greatest? Which is the greatest commandment of

them all? Some had counted 613 of them, in the Hebrew scriptures.

People have been asking “Who is the greatest?” for a long time. “I am the greatest!” said Mohammed Ali. The G-O-A-T. Which president describes himself as the greatest?

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall,
Who is the fairest—the greatest—of them all?”

It is often a mis-guided character who asks that question. Sometimes it is an evil character who asks who is the greatest. It is certainly an obnoxious character, a wicked queen, who demands and expects the title.

So, I am no fan of contests for the greatest. I accept that competition can be good, insofar as it inspires us to do better in life. But, in general, I do not answer particular questions about who, or what, is the greatest.

You know what? Jesus disagrees with me. He does answer the question! In today’s gospel lesson (Matthew 22:34-46), when Jesus is asked by his obnoxious testers, “Which commandment is the greatest?” he does answer the question.

In fact, I have often used his answer as a model for how to study the Bible. The bible has all sorts of laws. And, very often in life, we do choose to emphasize one verse at the expense of another! I believe that we are a better church because we have done so. So, while one verse in the Bible says “women should be silent in the churches,” (1 Corinthians 14:34), another verse says “in Christ, there is neither male nor female.” (Galatians 3:28). We are a better church because we consider that second verse greater than the other.

In like manner, when they ask Jesus which commandment is the greatest, Jesus does not meekly respond, “Well, they are all equally good! They are all valuable!” No, he actually gives a definite answer!

But! His answer does not use the Top Ten!

You remember the Top Ten in the Bible, don’t you? They are the Ten Commandments. There are many commandments in scripture. And the ones delivered to Moses in the Book of Exodus (and Deuteronomy), we call the Top Ten. The Ten Commandments. Things like, “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before you. You shall not make a graven image. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Remember to keep the sabbath holy.”

When they asked Jesus what the greatest commandment is, he did not turn to the Top Ten.

Instead, he lifted up the principle, the principle of what it means to be the greatest. He pointed to the foundation of all good laws and principles. He lifted up love.

Jesus is reminding us that there is only one greatest. Whatever we are listing, or comparing, or contesting over, there is only one greatest. The greatest is God. God is greater, we say. “God is that, greater than which, nothing is,” said Saint Anselm. We are to love the Lord our God, with all our heart and soul and mind.

When we are doing that, something else happens. A second principle emerges. When we love God, when we truly love God, we also love the “Other;” we also love the neighbor, the person who is next to us, and the person who is distant. Our neighbor is everyone, whether they are counted as number 10 in the list, or number 100, or number one million.

Where we are counted, in various lists, does not make any difference when it comes to love. Love does not rank people. Love does not put people in order of who is the greatest. Love, loves people, no matter where we are ranked.

Who’s number one? Each one of us is. Loving our neighbor means loving people as if each of us is number one.

AMEN.