

Matthew 22:34-46

One of the pricing games on the Price is Right game show on television is called the bonus game, or something like that. The contestant has to guess the prices of four small prizes. Behind one of these prizes is the hidden bonus which is always a great big prize. Even if the contestant is a lousy player, and is correct about just one of the four small prizes--if that is where the hidden bonus is, he or she still wins.

This is a little like the thinking of the Pharisees in our text for today. One of them asked Jesus, "Which is the great commandment in the law?" In other words: Of the Ten Commandments, behind which one is the big bonus prize hidden? Where is God hiding with the prize of eternal life? Which one of the Ten Commandments do I have to make sure that I get it right? They may all hang together, but one of them is at the top of the fulcrum; which one is it?

Now I know we're taught that there are no stupid questions, but don't you think that sometimes Jesus had to wonder? And not just about the Pharisees; I think He even wonders about us, because don't we have the tendency to think the same way?

Some people today think the big bonus prize is behind door number five. "If I keep the Fifth Commandment by not murdering anybody, I'll make it to heaven." Yet these people are ignoring what Jesus says about hating our brother in our heart being the same thing as murder. Others go for door number seven...the Seventh Commandment. "Since I'm no thief, I expect to be rewarded in the afterlife." Yet these people are ignoring the fact that even coveting what belongs to our neighbor (doors nine and ten) amounts to nothing less than stealing within our hearts.

Some church members have put the big bonus prize, not behind a "thou shalt not commandment," but behind their works of service. "I serve when asked...I contribute my fair share...somewhere behind all I do there must be that hidden reward." And do you suppose there are some who think, "As long as I show up to work once a year, God will congratulate me with the prize for a job well done"? Even if we fail at a lot of the things we do; even if God's Commandments fall by the wayside much of the time, as long as we've got that one thing we do for the church, or that one bad thing we don't do in our life, like the Price is Right contestant, we have faith that God will award the bonus prize to us. Go ahead and ask your neighbor, if you want, and you will see that this is exactly how they think. And then go and search your own heart and you will find, as I do in mine, that same Pharisaical way of thinking.

But this is not the way God thinks. Jesus did not pick a door when asked by the Pharisees which one of the commandments was the great one. Rather, He pointed to love. "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the great commandment. And Martin Luther, with his God-given wisdom, puts this love as the foundation for all the commandments. "What does this mean?" he asks. And behind each and every commandment he puts these words, "We should fear and love God..."

Now to our human way of thinking, this makes no sense. Loving the God who gave us the commandments is the key to obeying the commandments? This is not the way our human minds operate. When you are driving along Highway 94 and you see a 55 mph speed limit sign, do you love the person, the authority, which put up that sign? I don't. Love doesn't even enter my mind. I try to obey it, but I don't love the poster of the sign. When children are told by their parents to finish what's on their dinner plate, or to go and clean their room, do they respond with the words, "I love you for

giving me that command"? I didn't. The hearing and keeping of laws, to our way of thinking, has nothing to do with love. It's more about a sense of duty, or just simply about avoiding punishments.

Yet Jesus says that "Love is the fulfillment of the Law." How can this be? This is how. You and I will love God, not for giving us His Law, but for giving us the One who kept the Law for us; for giving us the One who was punished for all the times and ways in which we break God's Law. Our loving of God does not begin within us; it begins with God loving us perfectly in Jesus Christ. God gave all the Commandments, but the door behind which He is hidden is not any of these. Rather, it is the cross of Jesus. For there at the cross God's perfect love is revealed to sinners.

And that door to God and the big bonus prize is not one that we can open. We would never even find it, for one thing. We, like everyone in the world is doing, would seek God and eternal life by trying to keep one commandment after another. But He is not there. Eternal life is not there. Even if we could manage to be a lousy Prize is Right contestant and get just one right; just one commandment; just one law of God, we would never receive the big bonus prize because everything God gives is hidden within the cross.

Isn't this why, after the Pharisees came at Him with their great commandment question, that Jesus asked them, "What do you think of the Christ?" Now there's a good question! Not, "Which commandment is the one I should be focused on?" but "What do you think of Jesus?" All these stupid, idiotic stories about people lined up at the Pearly Gates and St. Peter is there standing guard, and he always has one question before they can enter--that question is never about Jesus, but is always something having to do with the law. People everywhere, even here in the Augusta area, and even we spend too much time looking at the commandments, but not enough looking at the cross. We spend too much time looking at what our hands are doing, and not at what Jesus' hands did for us on His bloody cross. We spend too much time looking at what we give up for God, but not at what God gave up for us.

If love is the fulfillment of the law, then the only way it will happen is not by our imperfect attempts at love, but by God loving us perfectly. And this is just what He does. Hidden behind the cross in your baptism God loved you by claiming you for His own. Hidden behind the cross in the words spoken by your pastor God, in love, declares you forgiven of all your sins. Hidden behind the cross in the Holy Supper, Jesus gives Himself to you with every assurance that His love for you will never fail. God, who is hidden behind the cross in these holy things, opens the door for you, and He gives you Himself, and all He has, and the prize of eternal life in His Son.

You and I cannot even begin to speak of loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, until we see His love for us in Jesus Christ. And when we do, then our love will reflect His love. Not perfectly, for we are imperfect sinners. But He keeps forgiving your sins. He keeps loving you in spite of your imperfections. And so we will begin to love God above all things, and our neighbor as ourself...and not for the prize, but because the prize is already yours in Jesus. Amen.