



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 25 (A)

Stumped

[RCL] Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

If you are a game show enthusiast and super competitive, there may be great appreciation in your life for programs like “Jeopardy” and “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” Both of these shows pride themselves on asking very challenging questions and they are designed to stump contestants. Of course, in the case of game shows, money and trinkets hang in the balance. When you decide to play a stump-the-contestant game with Jesus, however, be prepared to lose.

The second half of the 22nd chapter of Matthew is very compelling, in the sense that the Pharisees and the Sadducees take turns asking Jesus what sound initially like challenging questions, but are really designed to trap Jesus into saying things that are antithetical to a Messiah. In the gospel for today, it’s the Pharisees’ turn to ask the question – but this was not their first time approaching Jesus to test him. If you go back a little further toward the beginning of the chapter, you will notice that the Pharisees wanted to find out from Jesus whether or not people should pay taxes to Caesar as they handed him a coin with Caesar’s face on it. Now they were expecting that, if he was a king-wannabe, he would automatically say, “No, do not pay Caesar – rather, save your money for the real king.” He might even recommend revolution against the Roman Empire. It is obvious that with this type of machination going on, these Pharisees do not know who they are actually talking to. Jesus stumps them by saying, “‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this and whose title?’ They answered, ‘Caesar’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.” Round one: Jesus is in the lead. The Pharisees and Sadducees obviously were no match for our Lord and Savior.

Undoubtedly, you have many questions that you want to ask Jesus. You may be thinking that some of your questions might stump Jesus and still you want to challenge his authority like those of old. Jesus understands your curiosity and is fully prepared to take on all of the earthly challenges that can be thrown at him. Remember that this loving Jesus is ever-present. Jesus hears your questions as well as your cries, your temptations as well as your triumphs and disappointments. There is nothing too challenging for God. God also challenges us.

Today, as you look at many of the congregations and churches around the country – and, in fact, around the world – you must notice that many of our neighbors and friends have not returned in a regular way to worshipping in the community. Some siblings continue to watch services via Zoom while others catch the livestream on a hit-or-miss basis. It is challenging to figure out how to encourage them to return to the sanctuary on a consistent basis to receive the nourishment that can only be provided in-person. It is important to spend the time needed to build a closer relationship with God. Jesus asserts that the more time we spend getting to know God, the less tempted we are to challenge the lessons offered. Faith is a building exercise; faith requires attention to our practices, to our queries, and to our building of belief. In the case of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, it is apparent that their faith was superficial. Like the disciples, many of them wanted to follow Jesus closely, but they didn't have a complete understanding of who Jesus was. This impacted their ability to deepen their faith. In contemporary times, some humans want to believe deeply, and yet nagging questions still arise, including, among so many others: Whom does Jesus truly love? Am I worthy of God's love? Who will be first in the kingdom?

That takes us then to the next question asked of Jesus, this time by the Sadducees. They wanted to know what would happen to a woman who died as the widow of seven brothers, none of whom created children. They asked Jesus whom the woman would belong to in death. Jesus explained to them that, at the resurrection, it really doesn't matter, because people will not be given to each other in the same way in which they were joined together on Earth. Jesus also lets us know that God is "God not of the dead but of the living." Once again, the Sadducees are stumped. They thought for sure that they had a question that Jesus would not be able to answer, but Jesus reminded them again that he was not one of the contestants on their version of a game show.

Well, the Pharisees could not be outdone. They talked among themselves and finally approached Jesus with what they were sure was the question for the ages. A legal expert representing the Pharisees asked the Teacher, "What is the greatest commandment in the law?" In their minds, there were hundreds of laws, and chief among them, the 10 Commandments. It would be fascinating to see which one of those Jesus selected as the greatest, as until this point, it had been considered that each of the 10 Commandments was equal in requirement. But again, they weren't ready for the Lord's response. Jesus said to them, "'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." Love above everything else, Jesus asserts, because when you love God above all, it is easier to live your best life without fear or uncertainty. Instead of focusing on shallow questions, spend that precious time trying to figure out what God is calling you to do in this world in gratitude for God's assurance of eternal life.

These are important times in our country and in our world. As Christians, we should be consumed with how to bring people together. God is challenging us to see the face of God in our neighbors and then love them as we love ourselves. We should focus our energy and attention on the things that we must do every day as a recognition that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our being, with all our mind.

These things take time, beloved, and they require study and work. Ultimately, you will arrive at a place in life that will give you the energy, love, and peace to live in the world in the way God intended.

God really doesn't mind if you ask superficial questions like whether or not you should pay your taxes or whether or not you can be married to your brother's widow in the afterlife. But it would be sad if that became your primary focus, rather than asking God, "How do I show love in the world today? How, Lord, do you want me to show up in the universe so that people will recognize me as a child of God?"

Though they may never ask you those questions on "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" or "Jeopardy," you have access to the right answers. Amen.

***The Rev. Kathleen Walker** is the missioner for Black ministries in the Diocese of North Carolina. She joined the bishop's staff in 2020 to focus on the vitality of historically Black congregations by helping to weave their diversity into a closer bond of inclusion with other parishes and the diocese. The goal is to ensure all predominantly Black congregations have the best opportunity to make the fullest use of the resources of their parishes, partnerships, and the diocese. Rev. Kathy graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018 and shortly thereafter joined the clergy team at St. John's Episcopal Church in Tallahassee, Fla., as associate rector for pastoral care and parish life. She is originally from South Florida and was an active layperson in that diocese prior to discerning the call to ordained ministry.*