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The Great Law

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Discussion during the COVID Lock Down has emphasized the Economy in tension with Fighting the Disease. However after sorting our closets and Baking Banana Bread, what I found most important to people when alone were the questions of "What Matters?" "Who am I?" In one word what is most important to you?

In a poem by Linda Ellis

A man at a funeral referred to the dates on the stone, as from beginning to end. He noted that first came the date of birth with great expectation, then spoke of the following date with loss, but said what mattered most was the dash between. For that simple dash represents all the time they spent alive on earth, when now only those who loved them knew what that line was worth. It matters not how much we own, the cars, the house, net worth in cash. What matters is how we live and love, and how we spend our dash. So when your eulogy is read: Would you be proud of all the things they say about how you lived?

According to Matthew this is the question of the Pharisees. The Saducees already tried to trap Jesus in questions about Authority and Power, Money and Taxes, Sex, Death and Resurrection. So a Pharisee like a modern day pollster asks "What is most important?" "How will you be defined and remembered?" "Are you are Democrat or a Republican? Are you Conservative or Liberal? Are you Pro-Life or are you Pro-Choice? Are you more afraid of Russia or China?"

I find it telling about Human Nature, that after debate and being unable to win arguments over Power, Authority, Money, Taxes, Sex, Death and Resurrection, his question was at least on the surface a Legal Question about The Law. Rather than reasoning together. Rather than listening to personal stories about people's lives, the Pharisees and we today have tried "to legislate faith and morality". We have tried through Legislation and the Courts to mandate what people believe, about what is right and wrong, knowing that through "the Law", we can find guilt and hold accountability. The irony is that the God we trust is not about LAW. God gave through Moses 10 Commandments, but these were never intended as LAWS, the Commandments answer the questions: "Who we are" and "What Does Matter to a People of God". But that does not allow for guilt or judgment. Perceiving the 10 Commandments were 10 Laws, Judaism created Laws to protect us from breaking laws. Thus the question which is The Greatest Law.

However, Jesus answers with the most fundamental statement of Judaism, the SHEMA named in Deuteronomy 6:5, underscoring the 1st Commandment "To love the LORD your God with all your Heart, Soul and Mind." What Matters? GOD matters and my relationship to God matters. Who am I? I am a child of God. That is our whole purpose and identity. If we could simply do that, everything else in life and society would work. As to how to judge others, what to say about the morality and ethics of others? Jesus instruction Love your neighbor as you love yourself is far more than the Golden Rule. Jesus is offering a

new teaching, that if we LOVE GOD, and GOD loves all Creation, all our Neighbors, then by reason we must love others as we love our own life. This is like taking the absolute and objective and making it personal.

So why are we reading this on Stephen Ministry Sunday? Next year in 2021, our Church will have extended care and ministry from member to member through Stephen Ministry for 25 years, with Punky Griggs in 1996 being the first of 223 receiving 50 hours of training and commissioned to service.

The story I love the most about Stephen Ministry in our Church comes from Mary Lee Haas. Mary Lee convinced her husband they needed to go to the Wedding of his brother's grandson in St. Louis. At the Reception a distinguished looking man went passed and Mary Lee asked who he was. The person responded that's the Bride's Father Ken Haugk who created this Active Listening Ministry you probably do not know about called Stephen Ministry. Members of Valley Presbyterian are known for being forthright, so she marched up to Dr. Haugk introducing herself not only as the Groom's Grandfather's Brother's Spouse, but also that she is a trained Stephen Minister!

Why do I find that story so wonderful? Because Stephen Ministry is not about being elected to Office as Chairperson of a Committee, not about wearing Blue Name Tag; Stephen Ministry is personal, one on one relationship of active listening and care giving. There is no judgment, and there is absolute confidentiality. The purpose of Stephen Ministry being that: In the church, no one should need to struggle alone.

Prior to the COVID lockdown, do any of us still remember what happened prior to Covid?

As your pastor, I went for the week of Training, more than anything because I was trained as a Stephen Ministry Leader in 1985 and perhaps a good deal had changed. The most important elements were still hallmarks of Stephen Ministry: There is 50 hours of Training, followed by Commissioning in Worship, only female Stephen Ministers are paired with female members of the church, and only males with males, after Commissioning you are not sent out freelance instead every two weeks what is unique to Stephen's Ministry is that the Stephen Ministers come together for continuing training and supervision. Sometimes in ministry, we encounter stuff while listening that we have no clue how to process or what to say. Other times, we identify with the other person's story, and we need peers to listen to us and our issues. The principle elements that I perceived had changed were that 35 years ago the Church and ministries like Stephen Ministry were not as ecumenical as today, where our Stephen Ministers annually meet with those of the other Churches in our community to learn from one another; and, 35 years ago we were not as faithful to the need for boundaries, which is why Stephen Ministry today emphasizes that our Stephen Ministers are here to listen, actively listen and share fellowship with you.

I have recently come to wonder, that an unutilized role for Stephen Ministers might be with the spouse of our worshippers going through stages of dementia. For many in our church family, when a partner develops problems, neighbors and friends stop visiting or inviting us over because they do not want to intrude, or do not know what to do. If there were a Choir Member coming for Rehearsal, or a Committee member coming for a meeting, having a Stephen Minister for their loved one could simply provide the company and reassurance that they are not alone. That sounds pretty simple does it not, Christian CareGiving.

I have a personal story from 30 years ago about the importance of Christian Care Giving and Actively Listening to the person's rather than our own needs. A stranger came to worship one morning and sat by herself. After worship people sought her ought to welcome her, NOT asking her to volunteer or take responsibilities, just welcoming her. For the next two weeks she was absent, then she came to worship again and people expressed joy at seeing her. She became fairly regular, at least two to three times a month, but missing every now and again. We tried to broach membership, but she stated she was in the

area temporarily, knowing she would not be around for long. After almost a year she stopped attending, and all we could do was be thankful she had wanted to come regularly when she had been with us.

About six months later, I received a phone call. The person on the other end asked what kind of church this was. Then explained she was the sister of this woman, but they had been estranged for several years. She went on to explain that her sister had recently died of a long battle with chemo and radiation. She was sorting through her sister's belongings in part to try to get to know her better. In that their family had never been religious, she was surprised to find a whole stack of worship bulletins. Not only that, but her sister had written notes from sermons/prayers in the margins, starred some Hymns and Anthems as ones she enjoyed. She even had a Bible from the Church with several passages bookmarked and highlighted. We shall never know the journey others are going through, or when a word of encouragement, of welcome, simply allowing another to share the walk with you, will make all the difference in their life. I asked the sister what we could do for her, and she responded "Don't you know you already did it. You were her comfort when she needed it most. You provided what her family and friends could not."

Different from other passages throughout Matthew, Jesus did not follow this argument or teaching with a Parable. Instead Jesus takes leadership of the discussion asking What do we think about the Messiah? In Judaism, Messiah simply means "The Anointed One" so any prophet could be the Anointed One sent by God. However, Jesus asks for their interpretation of who they think The Messiah is? Is the Messiah the Son of David? Judaism had for centuries emphasized the Monarchy, and that the Messiah had to be of the Genealogy descended from David through Solomon, this was a principle reason for the Genealogies being included in Scripture. There was general acceptance that The Messiah whom they expected would be a Descendant of David, a human being, a Rabbi, a Prophet, a King, who would bring about a new Kingdom of Israel. But quoting the Psalms, which are attributed to David having been the writer, The Messiah is revealed to be "The Son of God"! What I think Jesus was getting at here, is The Messiah sent by God to people like us, is not simply historical prophecy fulfillment, this is about something Holy and Divine. When a Stephen Minister is in partnership with you and prays with you, it is "A Holy Thing."