

**“STILL WRESTLING”
(AFTER 45 YEARS)**

Matthew 22:34-46
October 20, 2024

I would like to begin this morning by acknowledging my brother, the Rev. Blair Corcoran and his wife Alison who are visiting from Ontario. My brother Blair has been serving as a United Church Pastor in Quebec, Ontario, and a brief stint in Newfoundland, for the past forty-five years. He is supposed to be retired, but he spends most Sundays preaching in United & Presbyterian Churches in rural Ontario. Between the two of us, we have had the joy of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ from Coast to Coast for over 90 years. What Grace we have experienced from the hand of God. I have been reading Blair’s sermons and using some of his illustrations since he began to preach. Nine sermons out of ten will begin with Blair saying these very familiar words: **“Let me tell you a story.”**

In honour of his presence with us this morning, I am going to begin my sermon by saying: **“Let me tell you a story.”** This is a true story, and it began in February 2023 when Pastor Dave held one of his morning Preachers Guild’s breakfasts. At that time, I had Covid and was not in attendance, so Pastor Dave suggested that I pick one of the Sundays in which there was an open spot and select the readings of the day from which I would preach. At that time, the Liturgical Calendar was in the Gospel of Matthew. As this Church has many gifted preachers, the earliest date available for me to preach was October 29th, 2023 and the reading for that day was the Gospel that was read this morning. But 2023 did not unfold like we imagined. Things changed. Pastor Dave and Christine left to enjoy their retirement, and the Parish voted in our new Shepherds, Pastor Ried and Pastor Sylvia and they brought in Logan Rutherford a student in training for future ministry. Consequently, my preaching date became what we call in the Anglican world, a moveable feast. That is not the first time this has happened. I remember on Valentines Day in 2018 that Valentines Day fell on Ash Wednesday and so we had the very first Ash Thursday service in all of Christendom. I hope you don’t have any plans for lunch as I am going to feed you well with the Word of Life. I. I

confess that I have been working on this sermon for 617 days and like any good preacher I finished it this morning on the way to Church.

One of rules that I have had in 45 years of preaching and Pastor Dave reinforced that rule while he was here - you need to put the daily Scripture reading in context. To put today's reading in context you don't want to just read the 12 verses read by Pastor Gary. If I only unpack those 12 verses, I am doing you a grave disservice. This encounter with Jesus did not begin with Jesus being asked about the Greatest Commandment in the Law. It actually began in Chapter 21, and I am going to suggest that some time this week, you read Chapters 21-23 to understand completely the entire event and I am going to skim over some of the content in those chapters. These three chapters include scenes of escalating conflict between Jesus and His critics, the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Sadducees. The Sadducees did not believe in the afterlife; the Herodians aligned themselves with the puppet King, Herod, and the Pharisees advocated strict obedience to the Law of Moses, especially regarding the Sabbath.

To put it all in context I will begin in Chapter 21 when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey. It is Sunday of Holy Week and what does a Prophet do when your audience is no longer listening to your words? Instead of speaking, they do something dramatic to get their undivided attention. You can find this truth by reading the major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Jesus is now following their example, and He was making a very clear statement as He rode into Jerusalem, the place where He will lay down His life as a ransom for many. He isn't speaking the words of Prophecy; He is making those Prophetic words from the book of Zechariah come to life. **"Say to Daughter Zion, see your King comes to you gentle and riding on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."** (Zech 9:9) This was a special Passover, and thousands had crowded into Jerusalem. Collectively they were asking: **"Who is this?"** (10) That the crowds are worshipping? The crowd responded that it was: **"Jesus the Prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."** (11) Now the religious leaders would not have been the least bit impressed by what Jesus was doing. He was claiming to be the King of the nation of Israel, but this is **NOT** the King the religious leaders wanted. They wanted a King riding on a white horse coming to overthrow the Romans. But Jesus

riding on the back of a foal was showing that that He was not a King of war, but the **King of Peace** and Jesus was showing them that His reign was to be one of **Peace** and **Service**. This prophet from Galilee was not part of the religious Leader's plans. But Jesus was not finished with His dramatic presentation. He went into the Temple, and He turned it upside down. He cleared the temple of those selling animals, exchanging money, and taking advantage of those who had come to worship and offer sacrifices. Again, Jesus was fulfilling Scripture; this time from the book of Jeremiah: "**It is written, my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.**" (Jer 7:11) Many of the stalls set up in the Court of the Gentiles were the private property of the family of the High Priest. They were making money hand over fist. After Jesus cleared the Temple, do you know who came in? Those who were blind and lame (14) and they knew this was the Saviour they needed. So, Jesus did what Jesus does. He healed them.

The religious leaders are now in an uproar, but which incident is at the root of their anger. The dramatic claiming of Zechariah's Prophecy, or the cleansing of the Temple or the healings or possibly because: "**People are shouting Hosanna to the Son of David.**" (15) In spite of all this chaos, the Spirit is breaking through and showing them who Jesus really is. We often take the word '**Hosanna**' as a Praise chorus, but in reality, "**HOSANNA**" means "**Save us Now.**" When I look at the chaos, the wars and the suffering that is currently taking place in our world, I want to shout from the roof tops: "**HOSANNA, SAVE US NOW.**" Jesus we need you to come and rule the nations and end these conflicts and suffering. Come and let the nations beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Jesus, stop letting nation take up sword against nation and stop them from training for war. (Micah 3:4) "**May your Kingdom come, and your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.**"

When Jesus' day was finished, He left for Bethany. The next morning on the way back to the Temple, He cursed a fig tree that was not bearing fruit, and immediately it died. The text says it wasn't the season for figs. However, before ripe figs appear, little buds are produced that taste sour. They can be eaten but there were none on the tree. Cursing the fig tree seems so out of character for Jesus, but remember, Jesus was no longer using words to persuade the religious leaders, he was demonstrating what their

eyes cannot see. What did He see in this particular tree? He saw His nation. The fig tree was a symbol for the nation of Israel. Israel was to be a **'fruit-bearing'** nation to show the nations around them, what it meant to have **God** as their **God**. Instead, they fell into pagan worship and adopted the false gods of the nations around them. As for their religion, it was a false religion, full of rituals and sacrifice, but displaying no real relationship with God. If they had a real relationship with God, they would have recognized Jesus by His signs and miracles as the long-promised Messiah. But instead, they want to put Jesus to death, and they will use whatever evidence they can muster to have Him put to death.

That day when Jesus returned to the Temple, the religious leaders asked: **"by what authority are you doing these things. Who gave you this authority?" (23b)** Rarely does Jesus' refuse to answer a question but this time He turned the question back on the authorities and asked them about John the Baptist's ministry. Where did John get his authority? They didn't dare answer Jesus and so Jesus refused to answer them. Instead, Jesus told three parables, which were specifically directed at the Religious Leaders. You can read the parable about the **Two Sons**, the **Parable of the Tenants**, and the Parable of the **Wedding feast** this week. But as you are reading, I want to remind you that there is going to be another Wedding Feast, of the Bride and Lamb. The invitations are almost all out and if you have received yours, I pray you have accepted your invitation and responded accordingly. **"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, and they knew He was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest Him, but they were afraid of the crowd, because the people held that He was a Prophet." (45-46)**

Since they couldn't arrest Him, they decided to try to trick Him. **First** it was the **Pharisee's** and the **Herodians** turn, and these two groups did not even like each other. But they wanted Jesus to jump into the middle of one of the most contentious issues of the day and tell them whether it was proper to pay taxes to Caesar or not. The text tells us that Jesus' answer stuns them: **"Give to Caesar the things that are Caesars and give to God the things that are God's."** (21)

Next the **Sadducees**, who were a very religious group, who constantly fought with the Pharisees over Resurrection. The Sadducees although they do **not** believe in

the Resurrection, asked a question about the Resurrection. They tell the ridiculous story of a widow who marries seven brothers. Jesus' response to them was dynamic. He tells them that that they do not even understand the Scriptures. Imagine saying that to a supposed group of religious Scholars. Yes, there will be a Resurrection. God is not the God of the dead; He is the God of the living. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all of our loved ones who have predeceased us. (32) Yes, there will be a Resurrection, because Jesus promised that, and He has yet to break a promise. Our God is a Faithful God and He doesn't break His promises.

After these two groups failed, the Pharisees sent a **Lawyer** to test Jesus by asking him a question about the greatest Commandment. Jesus immediately replied, **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind (Mark and Luke include the words) with all your strength. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.”** I don't need to say anything about the second Commandment as we heard a sermon two weeks ago by Pastor Sylvia on the Good Samaritan. She covered the subject perfectly, consequently nothing more needs to be said about loving our neighbours. Basically, what Jesus was saying in this passage was: **LOVE GOD AND LOVE PEOPLE.** You don't have to wait to find someone injured on the side of the road. Our neighbour could be that person in need, whether they are like us or not. We, in this Church, according to Jesus, **are the Light of the World**, let your light shine, a light that shows you love God and those around you. Be the hands of blessing that God says you are. Encourage, bless, and support those who God brings across our paths. Let us always err on the side of compassion and generosity, even if periodically, people take advantage of you.

But what does it mean to **“Love God with all your heart, all your soul. all your mind and with all your strength.”** I confess that I have been wrestling with that question for 45 years. I know with absolute certainty that God is Love and He pours His love into our hearts. That is what makes us capable of loving Him. God the Father wants a real relationship with each of us. My question is why God would want a relationship with me, a wretched sinner. You can't force anyone to love another person,

and neither will God force us to love Him. But I do love Him, and I tell Him, and I know He loves me, but I still wonder why?

I remember as a child being taught about my responsibilities to God. It was similar to what is outlined in our Anglican Catechism: ***“My duty toward God is to believe in Him, to fear Him, to love Him with all my heart, my soul, my mind, and my strength. To worship Him, to give Him thanks, to put my whole trust in Him; to pray to Him, to honour His Holy Name and His Word and to serve Him all the days of my life.”*** Regretfully, I have not served Him all the days of my life, but I have been trying to do so for the past 45 years. Unfortunately, like most human beings, I don't want to let go of control. In all our lives there is a **Throne**, and we have two choices regarding that Throne. Is **Self** going to sit on the Throne or will we permit **God** to sit on the Throne. There are days when I know personally that God is on the Throne, but there are other days I want to sit on the Throne myself. God doesn't wrestle that Throne from me, but I wrestle it from God. I am still learning, but I want Him on that Throne, and I believe after 45 years I have finally found the keys to the puzzle in keeping Him on the Throne and at the center of our lives. We can all do these **three** things to ensure that He stays on the Throne:

First, you need to have a genuine relationship with **Jesus**. When you read chapter 23 in Matthew you can easily discern that Jesus hates hypocritical religion. Yes, Jesus came to die for us, but He also came to reveal the Father to us, and if you have encountered Jesus, you have encountered the Father. When we love Jesus we are loving the Father and the Holy Spirit. They are **ONE**. However, Jesus is meant to be our **FIRST** love and if your heart has gone **lukewarm** or **cold** towards Jesus, then Jesus tells us in the book of Revelation to **repent**. I get on my knees, and I repent, by asking God to transform my heart. But this is not some magic trick. How is our heart transformed? It is transformed when we immerse ourselves in His **Living Word**.

The **Word of God** is the **Second** piece of the puzzle. I recently read this story. ***“In medieval Jewish Society, the Feast of Shavuot, which celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses by the hand of God, involved an initiation ceremony for boys who were about to learn. The boy in question was wrapped in a prayer shawl and taken by his father to the teacher. The boy would sit on the teacher's lap where he***

would be shown a slate on which were chalked some of the Hebrew alphabet, a passage from the Scriptures and the words: 'May the Torah be your occupation.' The Teacher would read each word, and the child would repeat it. Then the slate would be covered with honey and the child would lick it clean, thereby ingesting the Holy Words." (In Bed With The Word - Daniel Coleman, p. 96-97) It is not enough to read a Daily Scripture from an app. No, we need to digest the Word until it becomes a part of us. It must be part of our lives as daily meals are part of our lives. After you get yourself immersed in His Word, you will find it energizes and lifts our spirits.

The **Third** thing we need to do to Love God with all our **Heart, Soul, Mind,** and **Strength** is not to try harder but to acknowledge and to rest in His **Grace**. Grace, as we know, is God's unmerited and undeserved favour. God does not hold grudges and most of us are harder on ourselves and on our loved ones than we need to be. Our Father is a merciful, tender, loving Father whose Grace pours out of every fiber of His being. He wants us to drink in that Grace and to live our lives in His Grace; loving Him, loving ourselves and loving others. When God is welcomed into our lives He knows He is getting a tarnished sinner – one that needs to be cleansed, delivered, and healed. However, when He saves us, He grants us **reconciliation** with Him and His Father. (2 Cor 5:17-19). He gives us **forgiveness** of sins. (Col 1:13-14). We are **adopted** into His family, and we have the right to call God – **ABBA**. (Eph 2:19-21, Ro. 8:15) We have a **new life** in the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:4-5) And we have the promise of **Eternal life**. (John 3:16) But personally, I think the greatest gift is that our names are listed in the **Lamb's book of life**. They will never be erased, for it is written, not with pencil or pen or a computer, but written with the precious blood of the Lamb, who was slain for us. It doesn't seem like a fair exchange, but this is the exchange that God wants, and He says embrace His Son who offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice. "**Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world have mercy on us. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us your peace.**" (BCP-84)

If you do your homework, you will find at the end of chapter 23, three verses which show us the tender heart of Christ and of the Father. In chapter 23, Jesus responded to His religious enemies and **five** times He calls the Pharisees and religious

leaders: *'Blind Guides'* and **six** times *'Hypocrites.'* But it is the Historian Luke who reveals to us what happened when Jesus saw Jerusalem laid out before Him, He began to weep: **"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you kill the Prophets and stone those sent to you. How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say: "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.**

In closing, I would invite you to stand. I have led Anglican Worship services for at least 40 years and each time I would begin the services with these words on the screen, which I think I have now recited at least **9,640 times**. Would you please join me this morning in responding as the **People**:

Leader: ALMIGHTY God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name; through Christ our Lord. **People: Amen.**

Leader: Our Lord Jesus Christ said: Hear O Israel, The Lord our God is one Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

People: Lord, have mercy upon us, and write both these thy laws in our hearts, we beseech thee.

Leader: Lord, have mercy upon us.

People: Christ, have mercy upon us.

Leader: Lord, have mercy upon us.

There are not enough words in the English Language, nor do I have enough time to describe how God loves us, but we catch a glimpse of that love as we join together and

sing **HOW DEEP THE FATHER'S LOVE FOR US!** Let the words come from your heart as we collectively pour out our love for Him.