

# McCabe United Methodist Church

January 6 & 7, 2018

## Series: Puzzling Relationships

*The Puzzle of God and Others*

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Let's Pray:

*Mighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations on each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. We pray that your Spirit descends upon our lives in worship this morning and move us toward becoming more whole. I pray in the powerful name of your Son Jesus. Amen.*

Around Christmas our family likes to do a puzzle together. The puzzles we do are usually around 750 pieces to a 1,000 pieces. When you open the puzzle box, it can feel almost overwhelming. Where do you start? How should we go forward?

For us, we usually just chip away at it. We start with the edge pieces and try to find pieces that are easy to match up. As we chip away at the puzzle, the picture gradually comes into focus. As the pieces fall into place, the picture begins to clear up.

I share this because that's how it can be with our faith too, can't it? There are so many pieces to bring together if we want to authentically live our faith. It can feel like there are so many moving parts, so many pieces, and yet, we just need to get started OR keep going. We need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus to keep moving forward...

Sometimes the pieces of faith feel like they're rubbing against each other or they don't fit together. But more often than not, they do. And the more the pieces begin to go together, the more beautiful the picture becomes. The more the pieces of our faith fit together the better we are at living life.

As we consider this morning's Scripture, there are at least 2 substantial factors of the Jewish faith at play here.

First, there's the issue of different sects. These sects are kind of like Christian denominations. In the Christian church we have Methodists, and Lutherans, and Baptists, and Presbyterians, and nondenominational, many more. In the Jewish tradition there are different groups too. There were the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the Essenes and the Zealots and more. Each branch, each sect, had something that varied just enough so they felt they needed to separate and create a separate group.

The second factor at play in this morning's Scripture has to do with the number of rules, or pieces of faith at play.

The Jewish people, around Jesus' time, had 613 rules to follow. 613 commands. 613 pieces to living the faith. It's called the Mitzvah and a faithful person tried to follow all 613 Rules.

Today we hear terms like Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah. They're the coming of age ceremonies when a child becomes fully accountable for the rules, the traditions, and the ethics of the faith.

In Biblical times these were rules like: love God and pray to God. These were rules like don't gossip, rebuke sinners, care for the poor, and give to Charity. This is where the Kosher food laws came from and how to, and not to, prepare food. These rules included how to prophecy and how to do business and how to rest and how to punish. These rules included hygiene practices and sexual practices and ritual purity and how to sacrifice animals.

613 rules for living your faith...

In today's Scripture, the religious subgroup called the **Sadducees** tried to set up and embarrass Jesus. They'd wanted to stop his message saying everyone was invited to be part of the Kingdom of God. In trying to stop Jesus' growing influence, the Sadducees accidentally set Jesus up to amaze and attract the crowds even more. So... with the Sadducees failing, a group of **Pharisees** took on the task. They met together to develop and bring another question to Jesus. This was a question designed to put Jesus in his place.

Hear how it sounds in today's reading from Matthew 22, beginning with v. 34: After Jesus had made the Sadducees look foolish, the Pharisees wanted to give it a go. They got together to question Jesus again. One of them was even an expert in religious law. They tried to trap Jesus with this question: Of all the 613 pieces of the puzzle, of all the 613 commands in the law of Moses, in the Mitzvah: "Teacher, what is the most important commandment in the Law?"

Can you picture the scene?

There's a group of religious leaders and all their friends, hurling a question at Jesus. They wanted to back him into a corner with no good escape routes. At the same time, everyone else was watching. What would Jesus do? Nobody challenges, or gets challenged by the Sadducees and Pharisees and walks away unscathed.

613 questions. On one side, two teams of elite religious scholars, and on the other side, one wandering rabbi who doesn't always know where his next meal will come from.

And our Scripture doesn't show any hesitation on Jesus' part v. 37: Jesus replied: You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment.

It's a central tenet to the Shema, the morning and evening prayers in the Jewish tradition. And Jesus wasn't done. Jesus kept going v. 39: And a second command is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself.

The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commands.

Then Jesus turned the questions back onto his challengers, and when all was said and done some translations read: And they, the Pharisees, were speechless. And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Friends, what if we love God, and what if we love our neighbors in such a way that it leaves our critics speechless?

What would that look like?

What would that feel like?

What would that sound like?

Because if we do this with full authenticity... If we love God and love our neighbors with everything we have, people will be speechless by the way we live our faith.

This is about relationships isn't it? It's our relationship with God and it's our relationship with everyone God puts in front of us. Loving God. Loving neighbor. It's the Greatest Commandment.

Consider what this looks like in everyday life.

Consider the confirmation mentor who loves God and neighbor, but who might feel a little insecure, yet who commits to investing in the life of a teenager so they can wrestle together with what it means to be people of faith.

Consider the older couple who, because of their love of God and love of neighbor, can't help but develop relationships with neighbors around them. And through this, they eventually welcome some of these neighbors at church.

Consider the person who, because of their love of God and people, they pray without ceasing. They pray for a friend, and listen, and encourage, and gently invite at appropriate times.

Consider the woman who works behind the scenes and who prays and visits with small groups and gently brings her kids and grandkids and a couple friends to a meal or to worship.

Consider the guy who is ready and willing to help the underdog, even when others question the value of helping.

Consider the family looking for a place to feel welcome and valuable... walking in one of these doors and finding no preconditions and experiencing the love of God and the love of neighbor.

Many pieces, coming together.

Many pieces, coming together personally and through the life of the church.

Love God. Love Neighbor.

As we prepare our hearts and our minds for Holy Communion this morning, I'd like to invite you to think about your own life... if someone from the outside looks at our lives. If they don't have any previous information about us...

What would they say our Greatest Commandment is?

What would they say is guiding us and driving us?

What would they say is the most important thing in our lives, and in our lives together as the body of Christ?