

DO WE REALLY WANT TO KNOW?
(Deut. 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34)

The great Rabbi Hillel lived about the same time as Jesus. He was famous as a sage and scholar. Once a student asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah – or Law – while standing on one foot. Now you need to know that according to Jewish tradition, the Torah contains more than 600 commandments, so it would take a long time – and a great sense of balance – to cover it all while standing on one foot. But here's what Hillel said: "What is hateful to you, do not do to others." Does that sound familiar? It should because it's what we call the Golden Rule. "What is hateful to you, do not do to others," Hillel said; "that is whole law; everything else is commentary. Now go and learn."

The rabbis loved questions like that. It was a kind of game they played. The scribe who questions Jesus about the greatest commandment is basically asking him to sum up the law while standing on one foot. He wasn't being sneaky and underhanded. He wasn't trying to trip Jesus up. He wasn't being a wise guy. He was doing something any rabbi would have understood. In fact, any rabbi worth his salt would have jumped at a chance like this. I can imagine Jesus planting this scribe with his question in the audience.

Let's think a bit about learning and wisdom.

Jesus says the greatest commandment is really two commandments: first, love God with everything you've got, and second, love your neighbor as you love yourself. There's nothing new here, nothing radical, nothing controversial. Jesus is simply quoting scripture. First he quotes part of the *Shema* – Israel's confession of faith that we heard this morning in the reading from Deuteronomy: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* And then he quotes a passage from Leviticus (19:18): *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

Any rabbi in the crowd would have nodded agreement. The scribe who asked the question in the first place agrees that Jesus has summed up those 600 plus commandments pretty well. Jesus isn't telling his hearers anything they don't already know. Jewish kids learned the commandments at their parents' knees. They went to synagogue school. They had the commandments drilled into them until they were second nature. Jews took that part of today's reading about reciting the law to their children and talking about it when they were at home and when they were away, when they lay down and when they rose up, writing them on their doorposts and gates very seriously.

That was the tradition Rabbi Hillel stood in. And that's why he said that the law all comes down to the Golden Rule and everything else is commentary. And that's why he added, "Now go and learn." He could sum the law up in a sentence, but he couldn't leave it at that. "Now go and learn."

Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I like Hillel's answer better than Jesus'.

Let me explain. Jesus' answer is perfectly fine – as far as it goes. Love God and love your neighbor. But that raises even more questions. What does it

mean in practice? What does it mean to love God? *How* do we love God? We can't see God, we can't do anything for God, so how can we love God? Jesus doesn't tell us, at least not here. It's all too easy to take his summary as the final word: Love God and love your neighbor. I just wish he had added something like Hillel's final charge: Now go and learn.

Jesus might have said go and study what the prophets say about loving God. We might say go and study Jesus' parables and Paul's letters because they have something to say about loving God. Go and learn what it means to love God and love our neighbor

Go and learn because learning is the path to wisdom. Alfred Lord Tennyson said as much in his poem "Locksley Hall," "Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers." All the knowledge in the world won't do us much good unless we have a measure of wisdom to go with it.

Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the theological giants of the last century. But even the great Reinhold could say something stupid once in a while. In 1945 he was lecturing at Yale when he paused and looked out the window and said, "You know, sometimes I think that the little old lady with the Bible open on her lap understands these things better than we do with all our elaborate structures of analysis and ratiocination" (quoted in Wm. Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?*, pp. 24-25). He must have been having a bad day, because Reinhold Niebuhr never believed that simple piety is a substitute for rigorous study.

I grew up in a church that prided itself on preaching the Bible and nothing but the Bible. The preacher had a proof-text for every occasion. They had Bible studies galore. They studied what the Bible says, but they never studied what it *means*. They were as literal-minded as Reinhold Niebuhr's little old lady with the Bible open on her lap. And their literal-mindedness gave them an understanding of scripture that was shallow and one-dimensional.

No one has ever accused the United Church of Christ of being biblical literalists. The danger, though, is that in renouncing biblical literalism, we've inadvertently abandoned biblical literacy. We've thrown the baby out with the bath water.

Marian Plant calls this "the elephant in the room." In her book *Faith Formation in Vital Congregations* she writes, "All right, let's just say it. Most of the people in our local churches are biblically illiterate" (p. 73). That's pretty blunt, pretty harsh. Marian Plant is a college professor who happens to be a UCC minister, so I have to assume that she has UCC churches in mind when she says "local churches." She could include Episcopalians and Catholics and Methodists and Lutherans and Presbyterians, but I'm afraid she's speaking about us, too.

When I served my first church in Vermont, we spent some time studying Marcus Borg's book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. Some of you know it. After a couple of sessions one of the people in the class asked, "Why haven't we heard this stuff before? I always thought the Bible was straightforward. I never dreamed there was another way to understand it."

That's a sad and troubling indictment of pastors – and I'll include myself. We have found 101 reasons to look the other way while our congregations lost

touch with the Bible and drifted into biblical illiteracy – all the while lamenting the fact that our members know less and less about the Bible.

Marian Plant says that one of the results of this is that our members have only a childhood knowledge of a few Bible stories, and therefore they lack the resources, first of all, to meet challenges of life and, second, to challenge the powers of empire and social injustice. Ultimately they're not able to act in concert with God's Word for the healing of the nations and all creation

The costs of not knowing the Bible are high. Marian Plant sees this as a critical issue and says, "If a congregation is to be vital, its vitality will derive from and be sustained by an ever more intentional 'taking seriously' of Holy Scripture" (p. 85).

The Bible is not simple. Our faith is not simple. When Hillel summed up the law while standing on one foot and when Jesus boiled the commandments down to loving God and loving our neighbor, they weren't just saying something that popped into their heads. They were drawing on years of study and work and struggle with scripture. More important, they weren't giving us a shortcut, and they certainly weren't excusing us from our own study and work and struggle with the foundation story of our faith. All they gave us is a key to help in that study and work and struggle. We have the key. Now our challenge is to go and learn.