**Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity**

**Matthew 22:34-46**

***What is the purpose of Holy Scripture?***

Today’s Gospel takes place in the middle of Holy Week. Jesus has already entered Jerusalem and cleansed the Temple and now the Pharisees are frantically searching for one heretical word, one slight misstep in Jesus’ actions so they could rightly accuse Him of being a lawbreaker or heretic deserving of death. Matthew makes the setting clear: “when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees…” The Pharisees and Sadducees were theological enemies, the Pharisees thee Jewish Conservatives who believed and kept the Scriptures, while the Sadducees were what we might call the “progressives,” the ones who didn’t really believe the Scriptures or adhere to the laws of Moses. When Jesus silences the Sadducees, the Pharisees laughed, because they knew that, theologically, the Sadducees were no match for Jesus. He could defeat them with half his brain tied behind his back just to make it fair. Now they move in to show the Sadducees how to take down an enemy like this one. They pick an expert in the Law, the wisest among them who poses a softball question: “Which is the great commandment in the Law?” This is asking a mathematician “What is 1+1?” “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” A simple and uncontroversial answer, two simple quotations from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Jesus is right and no one can fight Him.

But before another question can be asked, Jesus asks His own: “ What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?” Now the real debate has begun. The Pharisees think the Messiah is a mere man, someone simply of the house and lineage of David. And then Jesus asks His “gotcha” question that proves that the Christ is both God and Man, David’s son, yet David’s Lord, fully human and fully divine.

While this is true and a point that cannot be contested, we cannot focus on only one piece of this episode, of either the Pharisees’ question or Jesus’s. To divide this is to miss the point. The real question, the real point for us today is, “How do you read Scripture, what is your use of it?” The Pharisees saw Scripture as a rule book, a set of laws that must be followed to be a good person, to earn your way into eternal life. But Jesus redirects the Pharisees’ understanding of Scripture to show them that it is all about Himself. He is not merely a golden thread running through Old and New Testament, but the subject of each divinely inspired word, the one whose life and work give meaning to each page. All Scrpiture must be seen as about Him and pointing us to Him. That means all Scripture oils down to the two great doctrines: Law and Gospel.

If we approach Scripture as the Pharisees did, seeing it merely as a rulebook, as Law, we miss the point. They used Scripture as a weapon, as rules to be obeyed, a way to make themselves look better. We easily fall into the same trap. We look at the Ten Commandments and think, “I can do that,” and use it as a way to compare ourselves to others, to exalt ourselves above others. But whoever lives by the Law will die by the Law. It is a false, misleading dream that God has given us His Law as a way to redeem ourselves. Rather, it shows our sin. Jesus says all of Scripture is summed up in two commandments: Love God perfectly and neighbor as well. Guilty on both counts. I cannot do it, nor do I even come close to *trying to do it*. Because Scripture is not a tool to self-redeem nor to bludgeon the neighbor. Forget not the plank in your own eye while fixating on the speck in the neighbor’s.

Instead, live by Scripture’s true purpose: look to the cross, trust Christ, and live. In Jesus Christ is perfect obedience, perfect love of both God and neighbor, perfect obedience imputed to you at the Font. Jesus took on your disobedience, as the God-Man obeyed the entire Law, and died for your sin, making His complete payment yours and making it as if the perfect obedience were yours as well.

Now freed from sin and eternal punishment, strengthened by the Spirit given in Word and Sacrament, you are also freed to love God and neighbor, that is, to be fully and truly human: to know yourself rightly as a redeemed child of God, one made and known by the Creator.

Here is revealed the true purpose of Holy Scripture: Law and Gospel for you to examine and know yourself and to take comfort in Jesus Christ, and Law and Gospel for you to live by and share with the neighbor so they too may know God aright as the one who created them, redeemed them, and sanctifies them, graciously keeping all His children in this life until the next.