

10.15.2017 Trinity 18 (Matthew 22:34-46)

Everything has a purpose. Screwdrivers are meant to turn screws, hammers are designed to drive nails, and ladders help us climb. Yet all too often, instead of respecting that fact and doing things as they should be done, we'll use a butter knife to turn a screw, a wrench to pound a nail, or turn a garbage can upside down to climb up on the roof. What's the result? Well, we end up with a wife that isn't amused about another ruined butter knife, we now have an adjustable wrench that can't be adjusted because we broke it by trying to use it as a hammer, and hopefully all we hurt was our pride when we fell off that trash can. The simple truth is that life is easier, better, and less painful when we understand that everything man makes has a purpose, and we should use these things for the specific task they're designed to perform. Now, if that's true of what man creates, how much more is it true of what God creates?

In the first chapter of Genesis, where we read about God creating heaven and earth, we see this pattern of the Word of God speaking something into existence, and then God declaring: "*It was good.*" In this opening chapter of the Bible, God creates light, and it was good. He creates the land and the sea, and it was good. He creates plants and trees, and it was good. The phrase "*It was good*" is repeated six times in this chapter. God created everything, all things for a specific purpose, and it was all good, right up until God created man. In His own image He created mankind, both male and female, and no longer is it good, but now God looked "*at everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good*" (Genesis 1:31).

When God formed man, He created us for a purpose - to live with purpose, a "*very good*" purpose, the best purpose in all of creation. This is the focus of our Gospel reading this morning. If you wonder about your purpose, how God created you to live every day, look to His Son for the answer. If you don't want to walk around this earth like a bent butterknife or a broken wrench, look to Jesus for direction, and honor

the purpose for which God created you.

Let's look for His direction by considering the context and events of today's Gospel reading. The setting is Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus is in Jerusalem, and the religious leaders are desperate and furious. Just a few days ago, Jesus entered the city triumphantly as the crowds laid down their cloaks and scattered palm branches on the path in front of Him, and "*cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest*" (Matthew 21:9). The crowds welcomed Him as their king, and the established leadership feared there may be a riot, or worse. They had to do something, and quickly, about this Jesus of Nazareth.

So the Pharisees send the Herodians, their political leaders, to try to trick Jesus with a question about paying taxes, saying to Him, "*Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness*" (Matthew 22:17-18), and their plan failed. Then, the Sadducees, their religious authorities, try to trap him with their question about marriage in heaven, but they fail as well. Now the Pharisees, their legal authorities, gather together. They select one of their own, a brilliant lawyer and expert in the Jewish Law, to challenge Jesus. He asks, "*Master, which is the great commandment in the law?*" (Matthew 22:36). It's important for us to understand what he's asking. The religious authorities counted 248 affirmative commands, the same number as their count of the bones in the human body; and 365 negative commands, as many as the days of the year. This brings the total number of their commandments to 613.

613 commandments, and this lawyer is asking Jesus to choose one, and call it the greatest. His strategy is clear. He knows that if Jesus picks one, they'll be able to accuse Him of neglecting all the rest. This expert is trying to trap Jesus, but even though he's setting a trap with this question, we all want to know Jesus' answer, don't we? We were amazed by how perfectly He answered the question about paying taxes, when He said, "*Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are*

*Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's*" (Matthew 22:21). We were stunned by the way He silenced the Sadducees, saying, "*You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God*" (Matthew 22:29). How can we help but be on the edge of our seat waiting to hear how Jesus will answer this, the most challenging of these questions. A question, that when answered correctly, reveals the greatest and most essential commandment that God has ever spoken to His people.

In our busy culture, where all too often life is hectic and challenging, the answer to this question is exactly what we need. The answer is a gift to the tired, the weak, and all who believe there isn't any way that they can possibly keep 613 commandments, because they're having difficulty keeping ten. Jesus' answer is a gift to the people of God, for it provides the way to keep every commandment, even 613, just by keeping two. The lawyer asked, "*Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*" (Matthew 22:36-40). Jesus' answer identifies love for God and neighbor as the nail on which everything else hangs. If we get love right, everything is right, but if we get love wrong, nothing can be right.

The inspired words of St. Paul in his great chapter on love express that truth perfectly. He writes, "*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing*" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). If we get love right, everything is right, but if we get love wrong, nothing can be right.

Here's the reason why: Everything was created for a purpose, and from butter knives to human beings, nothing can be right if that which was created is not being used to fulfill the purpose for which it was designed and created. You can turn a screw with a butter knife, and from your limited perspective, you are accomplishing something, but in the eyes of the person who designed and created the knife, you are not. A butter knife was not made to turn a screw, so from the perspective of its designer and creator, you are accomplishing nothing because you aren't using the knife in a way that fulfills its designed purpose. You have taken it upon yourself to re-purpose the knife, and in my experience, by choosing to use it improperly, you will break it and somebody will have to pay.

It's not so different with human beings. St. Paul tells us that one could speak with the tongues of men and of angels, have faith to move mountains, bestow all their goods to feed the poor, even give their body to be burned. By every outward appearance it would seem the person was accomplishing something, even doing the miraculous. Yet without love, without God, who is love, a person (no matter what they do) cannot fulfill the purpose for which they were designed and created. A person, without God, is nothing. A person, without God, is broken and Somebody had to pay.

In one way or another, at one time or another, every one of us has got love wrong. We've chosen a lie instead of the truth, darkness instead of light, hatred instead of love. In doing so, we've tried to re-purpose ourselves, but human beings cannot be re-purposed, and so we've ended up separated from God, broken, and completely unable to fulfill the "*very good*" purpose for which we were created. Time and again, we got love wrong, but God, through His Son Jesus Christ, got love right. We brought the sin into the world that separated us from Him, and through Christ, God cast that sin "*as far as the east is from the west*" (Psalm 103:12). Through Christ, we are brought back into right relationship with God. Through Christ, we are redeemed, restored, and can once again fulfill the purpose for which we were created. The best

purpose in all of creation.

The Son of God gave His life so that we can live with this purpose, His purpose: To love God and to love our neighbor. The Word of God declares that such love is our only purpose.