

“The Heart of the Gospel”

“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

- Matthew 22:40

It was another trick question. Like the question about whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not, like the question about whose wife the woman who had been married seven times would be in the resurrection, the question posed in today’s Gospel lesson by the lawyer, a recognized and respected expert in the law of Moses, was a question posed with a desire to trick Jesus.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” he asked.

Rabbinical scholars have identified 613 separate laws recorded in the Torah, and I suspect that the devious thinking behind the lawyer’s question was that no matter which of the 613 laws Jesus chose to identify as the “greatest,” he could be attacked for not choosing the other 612. Can’t you just imagine the Pharisees greatly anticipated and gleeful response to Jesus’ answer, no matter what it was? “How can you say, Jesus, that not worshipping idols is more important than not committing murder? You can’t really mean, Jesus, that opening one’s hand to the poor and needy is a greater law than observing the Sabbath?”

But Jesus doesn’t take the bait. He replies with an answer, as orthodox as it initially appears, and as familiar as it is to most of us today, that challenges the Pharisees’ entire understanding of the law.

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” Jesus quotes a variation of Deuteronomy 6:5 – the Shema, the first verse that Jewish children commit to memory and that is recited several times each day by devout Jews – and identifies it as the first and greatest commandment. Then, without skipping a beat, he identifies Leviticus 19:18, “You

shall love your neighbor as yourself” as being just like the first law he has recited. “On these two commandments,” Jesus concludes, “hang all the law and the prophets.”

The law, Jesus was clearly saying, as he looked the Pharisees straight in the eyes, is not about an unrelated collection of cold rules and regulations scattered throughout the Torah. The law is all about love. According to Jesus, those two laws – love God and love your neighbor – are what give meaning and authority to the other 611 laws.

Here’s another way to understand the difference between the Pharisees’ and Jesus’ understanding of the purpose of the law: When you approach a traffic light, and it’s red, how many of you will stop? (That’s good!) But why will you stop? Because it’s a law? Because a police car might notice if you don’t and give you a ticket?

These are sound, but Pharisaical answers. The best reason to stop at a red light, and, Jesus would argue, the only reason the law exists in the first place is because if you don’t, you, or someone else might get hurt. It is our relationships – with God, with others, with ourselves – that are important to God – not a mindless adherence to laws set down in black and white.

Now most of you know that I am a Lectionary preacher. That means that on most Sundays, the Biblical texts we plan our service of worship around are the ones prescribed by an ecumenical group so that most of the Bible is covered over a three year period. And, it never ceases to amaze me how often the texts speak so specifically and directly to situations we are facing as individuals, a church, or a community.

Law, lawyers, love and neighbors have been occupying a lot of my time over the past few weeks – and not just because of today’s Gospel lesson!

Many of you know that this time last year Shenkel Church had agreed to participate in a community ministry of providing temporary, emergency shelter for our homeless neighbors. The weekend before we were to open our doors, officials, including an attorney, from North Coventry Township appeared on our doorstep and told us it would be against the law – that our township zoning laws did not permit people to sleep in a church.

Those of us who had been involved in preparations to house our guests were horrified and appalled – besides the fact that Shenkel has participated in this ministry in the past (some of you will remember the “One Night at a Time” program) – how could offering a warm, safe place for folks to sleep not be considered part of the ministry of a church? If Jesus himself summed up the law with the words “Love God and love neighbor,” how could a church stand by and do nothing when our neighbors were freezing to death on the streets?

Fortunately, other churches stepped up – including Zion’s UCC, St. John’s UCC and St. Paul’s UCC in Pottstown – and the rotating shelter program operated very successfully last winter.

Our Consistory decided to find out if it was legitimate for Shenkel’s ministry to be restricted in this way by our Township. According to North Coventry’s position, not only could we not participate in that particular program, we are unable to legally host work camp groups, have a youth group lock-in, provide emergency shelter if the Schuylkill floods again or if there is an extended local power outage or any other kind of local disaster, or engage in any ministry that involves sleeping in our church. From their perspective, that is a residential usage of our building, and since we are zoned for “religious use,” which in North Coventry’s ordinance precludes residential use, we would need to apply for a zoning variance and abide by residential use ordinances to undertake ministries such as those.

Consistory's position is that providing temporary, emergency housing is NOT residential use – it is ministry. We retained a lawyer who researched this issue for us, and found, as we believed, that churches throughout Pennsylvania and across the country regularly open their doors to provide temporary shelter for those in need. However, North Coventry Township responded to our lawyer's finding by stating that North Coventry does not use the word "church" in its ordinance, but defines "religious use" as specially excluding residential use, and reiterated that since they believe providing temporary, emergency shelter is residential use, they were standing by their original position that we are precluded from this ministry without a variance.

Now here's the thing – we understand that North Coventry Township officials are concerned about safety – in fact, the preamble to North Coventry's Zoning Ordinance states that the law was enacted "in order to promote, protect, and facilitate the public health, safety and welfare." But where do you think a homeless person would be safer tonight – sleeping on the floor in our Fellowship Hall while two adults remain awake to supervise through the night, or sleeping in an empty garage in someone's back yard? Is forcing people to sleep in tents and cardboard boxes out in the woods so no one will notice them and tell them to "move on" really promoting, protecting and facilitating the public health, safety and welfare of residents of North Coventry Township? Rev. Kork Moyer, of Ministries at Main Street, a ministry to and with local homeless folks, personally knows twenty people in North Coventry Township – not in Pottstown Borough – who this weekend, did not have a safe, warm, place to sleep.

In the original Hebrew in the passage from Leviticus that Jesus quotes when he says love your neighbor as yourself, the word love is not a sentimental, feel-good word. Jesus is not saying that feeling sorry for and hoping the best for our homeless neighbors is what is called for. The word love that Jesus uses is a verb –

to love our neighbors means to act in a loving way towards our neighbors. The Consistory of Shenkel UCC believes that acting in a loving way towards our neighbors may at times mean opening our church building to provide temporary, emergency shelter for people in need of a warm, safe place to sleep.

So, we are appealing North Coventry Township's ruling. If we don't do so within 30 days, we can lose, forever, the option to offer this ministry.

On this Reformation Sunday, this adaptation of Martin Luther's respectful, but bold assertion when he was challenged about the 95 Theses he nailed on that door of the Wittenberg Castle rings in my ears: "Here we stand. We can do no other. God help us."

And here are some ways you can help:

1. Pray. Pray for the homeless folks in our community, and pray that our church, and other churches in our community might act with courage and wisdom as we seek to be faithful to Jesus' command that we love our neighbor as ourselves. And pray for the Township officials, that they might become partners, rather than stumbling blocks, in our efforts to provide temporary, emergency shelter to our neighbors in need.
2. Contribute to our legal defense fund. Our attorney is serving us at a significantly reduced rate, but the Township's funding (ironically, our tax dollars) is bottomless. Make your contribution to Shenkel UCC and note "Emergency Shelter" in the memo.
3. Donate baked goods or your time at our Bake Sale on Election Day. This will be a good opportunity to talk with folks, and raise some money to support this ministry. You can drop off baked goods any time during the day – call the church office if you can volunteer your time to man the table.

4. Talk to you friends and neighbors, and engage their support. Right now, we're asking for signatures on a petition supporting the desire of the congregation of Shenkel United Church of Christ to offer their church as a temporary emergency shelter for people in need of a warm, safe place to sleep. Copies of the petition are available in the narthex, as well as a page of "talking points," information we feel is important to share with members of our community.
5. Finally, please share your own thoughts with any member of Consistory about this issue. It has been challenging and frustrating for us all.

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Love of God, love of neighbor – that is the foundation of all the law, and it is the heart of our faith, not only according to Jesus' words on that day that he silenced the Pharisees, but according to Jesus' life – by his relationship and obedience to God, and by his relationships with others – his teachings and his actions that offered healing, hope, wholeness and well-being for every person he encountered.

May our lives, as individuals, and as the congregation of Shenkel United Church of Christ, as followers of Jesus, bear the same witness.

Amen.