

Two Sides of the Coin

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

October 26, 2008; Tim Devine

St. Paul's United Church of Christ; Seattle, Washington

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

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

During this political season, the idea of silencing a whole group of people with whom you disagree is intriguing, to say the least.

It is not too much of a stretch to say that the Pharisees and the Sadducees were the Democrats and Republicans of their day. These two groups were vying for the leadership with and power over the ancient Hebrew people. The Pharisees were one group of priests and religious authorities and were the group that connected more with the common people of ancient Israel.

The Sadducees were the other political group and were also priests and religious authorities, but ones that had closer ties to the economic elite of that society. The Pharisees evolved into what today is mainstream Rabbinic Judaism. The Sadducees didn't evolve, and vanished from the history of the Jewish people within a few generations of the time of Jesus.

The Pharisees were generally pragmatists. The famous passage from Leviticus about “an eye for an eye” and “a tooth for a tooth” was interpreted by this group as the money amount for such damages. The Sadducees were generally literalists and would expect the removal of an eye or a tooth as payment for the initial injury.

And, as we might expect, the Pharisees and the Sadducees couldn't stand each other.

But they weren't alone in vying for leadership and affiliation. There were two other groups at the time. One was called the Essenes. This is the group that left the famous Dead Sea Scrolls in the caves at Qumran that were found in the 1940's. Even though they wanted folk to follow them they were fairly apolitical, and much more mystical and ascetic in their living. Sort of like an ancient and early group of “new-age thinkers.” They were out of the mainstream, yet, like the Pharisees and the Sadducees they very much believed that their way was the correct way.

And then there were the zealots, or the revolutionaries. There were the people that wanted to fight Rome at all costs and get the occupying power out of their land. And there also were the folk who would invent new concepts and rules and who would send terror into the hearts of those wedded to the status quo. In short, they fought in new ways

that were perceived by those in power – like Rome – as dirty ways. And this has happened throughout history. From the example of the American colonist revolutionaries who fired sniper shots at the British army from behind trees and other barriers while the British continued to march essentially unprotected in rows; to the Japanese Kamikaze pilots of World War II, to the suicide bombers in the contemporary Middle East.

And it was these revolutionaries, these common folk without the connections to be either a Pharisee or a Sadducee, or the ideals and means to live outside of society like the Essenes – these revolutionaries were the folk that were surrounding Jesus during his ministry. They were attracted by his message. Some understood and let go of the need to attack back and win. Others were disappointed at the end of his life. He wasn't going to be the leader of the uprising after all.

Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealot Revolutionaries.

So when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, it was a huge deal. But, human nature being what it is, this evidently wasn't enough. They couldn't just enjoy the silence. They couldn't simply celebrate the victory of the moment. They had to talk, to rub it in. One of them, a lawyer, had to ask a question of Jesus that most of us hear as a test.

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

Stem cell research, gay marriage, taxes, abortion, reparation, faith-based initiatives using government funding – you fill in the blanks. Like these contemporary examples, each side had an expected and a favored answer.

But, Jesus being Jesus, never quite falls into that trap. He doesn't give an answer that will offend some and be applauded by others. He answers in a much broader way than anyone expects, and then he asks them a question that they can't answer.

“He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus won't let them have the satisfaction of an either/or, but rather delivers them a both/and. It is not either the law or the prophets, rather it is the law and the prophets.

It is not the Pharisees or the Sadducees. It is all four groups – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Revolutionary Zealots having to work and live together. How difficult. How cynical. How frustrating. And how familiar.

The law might be seen as following the rules. As piety. As observing the rituals and in coloring within the lines. Not being a bother. Not making waves. But definitely helping out and keeping the common good. I think of Martha.

The prophets might be seen as the voice calling out an inconsistency. The risk-taking for justice. The critique on the social and economic order. The going at the root of the problem rather than offering a band-aid. But definitely having the risk of its militancy drowning out its message. I think of Mary.

Law and prophets. Two sides of the coin. There exists no vantage point where you can see both sides at the same time. That is a simple fact of geometry. We have to move, to step outside of what may be a comfort zone, in order to see the other side. And as uncomfortable or unfathomable as that may be or feel, from time to time we have to do just that. It is the only way we can see the blemishes on both sides. It is the only way to take the log out of our own eye, so that we can comment on the speck in the other's eye.

No one person, no one political party, no one religion, to one particular life practice has all the answers. No one has a monopoly on the truth. And there is no one path to truth. It would certainly be easier if this weren't true. Our sound bite culture would be very satisfied. Just tell me what to do. Just give me the answer. Just offer me black and white answers in a gray world. It is tempting. And for all those folk who would ask the question, it isn't what Jesus would do.

Jesus lived the questions. And that, I believe, is what he offers us. Living the questions. Not finger pointing. Not being holier than thou. Not being self-righteous. Not being self-centered. Not having the militancy or the arrogance of being right. But, rather, having the courage to be open.

Two sides of the coin. Law and prophets. A world with Pharisees and Sadducees and Essenes and Zealot Revolutionaries.

That is God's challenge and that is also God's promise. Two sides of the coin. Find the truth in both. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

Matthew 22:34-46

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Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"

No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.