

“I Can Do It Myself!”
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 21A
Matthew 22:34-46

I can do it myself!

That’s what I said to my dad, as I tried to put up the little pup tent. On family camping trips, we usually slept in one, large tent. But on this particular trip, dad had brought along a pup tent, and he told me that, since I was the oldest, I could sleep in it myself.

When we arrived at the campground, my dad told me, “In just a minute, I’ll show you how to set up the pup tent.” But I was 8 years old, and I already had a male ego! So I said to my dad, “I can do it myself!”

Well, I don’t need to tell you what a disaster ensued. I did not know how to put the poles together, or tie the knots, or how to put the clamps into the ground... but there was no way I was going to ask for help! Later that night, the tent basically collapsed on my face. Then it started to rain. So, with some humility, I went over to the big tent, and I said to my dad, “I need your help.” And he gently responded, “Come on, I’ll show you how to do it.”

I *wish* that I could tell you that this was the last time that I allowed pride, or ego, to keep me from asking for help. But there are still many days when I find it hard to say, “I don’t know how to do this. I need help.”

For the past few weeks, I’ve wanted to say to my congregation: “I don’t know how to preach about these Gospel readings.”

And I’ve finally figured it out *why* it’s been hard to preach on these passages. I think it’s because, in this section of Matthew’s Gospel, *Jesus is asking us to do things that are impossible*.

Think about it –

A few weeks ago, we heard the parable of the guy who owned the vineyard. And he paid people the same wage, whether they went to work at daybreak or at three in the afternoon. In that parable, Jesus told us that we have to radically change our sense of fairness. Well... I don’t know how to do that!

Then we heard the parable of the wedding banquet. And Jesus told us that we must always be ready for the banquet. He told us to be ready for something *without telling us* when it will happen. Well... I don’t know how to do that!

Last Sunday, he told us that we have to figure out how to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,

and to God what is God's. But I've been trying to figure out that distinction my whole adult life. I still have trouble.

And today, he tells us that we must love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. And we must love our neighbor as our self.

Frankly, it feel like the tent has collapsed again, and the wet canvass is pressed against my face. We've reached a place in the Gospel where Jesus has asked us to do what we – on our own - cannot do.

“Love the Lord with *all* your heart?” Sounds great! I hear Jesus says this, and I quietly respond, “Amen. So be it! Yes – love the Lord with my whole heart.” But our hearts of full of so many other things!

Spouses love each other. Parents love children. People love their jobs, their homes. Teens love their iPods, kids love their puppies. I love Elvis and Oreos.

You can be a happily married person, a happily single person, or a happily celibate person... and then without warning you become *restless*. Your eye starts to wander... your brain starts to daydream... your passions start to prickle... How can I love God with ALL my heart, if my fickle heart won't stay focused hour by hour?

Then Jesus says, “Love your neighbor.” But what if your neighbor is a pain in the side – or some other body part? What if your neighbor is the wrong color, the wrong sexual orientation? What if your neighbor speaks the wrong language, or came from the wrong homeland.

What if your neighbor is going to vote... for the wrong... candidate? What if your neighbor IS... the wrong... candidate? What do I do with them, Jesus? Love them? Are you kidding?

Wait. Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as *yourself*.” But what if you are one of the countless millions who have low self-esteem, and fear that you are unlovable due to some aspect of your life? What if society has taught you that you have no inherent value due to your gender, or your race, or your economic background? How do I love God and neighbor if I don't even know how to love myself?

Jesus tells us to love God, neighbor and self with our whole, restless, heart. Well, I don't know how to do that.

And perhaps that is precisely the point of conversion in today's Gospel passage. In laying out what appear to be these impossible goals of discipleship, Jesus is not setting us up for failure. He is opening up an invitation. He is not setting the bar far too high, he is showing us how to stoop down low. He is not judging us - he is waiting for us to crawl out of the collapsed tent, and to say with real humility, “I can't do this myself.” And at that moment, he whispers, “Here, let *me* show you.”

The only people who need a savior are the ones who understand how much in their life needs saving.

The only people who can reach out to Christ are the ones who have tried to do everything by themselves, and now see that there are some things they cannot do alone.

The people who really pray are the ones who understand their *real need*.

Jesus calls us to be his disciples, and then he sets the bar very high. “Redefine your understanding of fairness! Be ready for the invitation! Discern what belongs to Caesar and God. Love the Lord and your neighbor with every ounce of strength that you have.”

And when you reach the point of saying “I can’t do this on my own, I need your help,” you have reached the place where authentic discipleship begins - the place of helplessness, that causes you to reach out of the Divine Helper.

Jesus never promised to take away every overwhelming challenge. He DID promise that if we follow him, he will show us how to become more and more like him. He himself loved the Living God with his whole heart. He loved every human being that way. If we follow him, he will show us how to do the same, step by step.

That’s the promise that is repeated to us in the waters of baptism. In the waters of baptism, disciples of Jesus are reborn. And Jesus will ask every disciple to do very hard things. But we do not have to do them on their own. We become members of the church – the community of believers, the Body of Christ, brothers and sisters on the way to God. And we receive the promise of the Holy Spirit, who can teach us how to do what we think is impossible.

So, if you are not sure how to love God, or your neighbor, or yourself, listen. In your soul, you will hear Jesus saying, “It’s OK, I’ll show you how.”

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