

Who's Your Boss?

Twenty-second Sunday After Pentecost
October 29, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar
St. David's Episcopal Church, North Chesterfield, VA

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 (NRSV)

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, ² but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. ³ For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, ⁴ 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. ⁵ As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; ⁶ nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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 (NRSV)

When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ 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.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love

your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question:⁴² “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.”⁴³ He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,⁴⁴ ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’?⁴⁵ If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”⁴⁶ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

This past Monday Barbara’s and my niece had her second child, a little boy. Like all babies, this little guy is going to rule the roost for a little while. Babies are kings or queens of their own little universe, aren’t they? Whatever they demand, they get: food, a diaper change, a cuddle, an interesting rattle or little plaything. All they have to do is cry or fuss a little bit. But as the child gets older, he or she becomes aware that there’s another, bigger universe out there.

And rather than them expecting things from their little universe, this big universe expects things from them. It expects them to wait for food. It expects them to wear big-boy or big-girl pants. It expects them to walk when they may rather be carried. And when they get to be about two years old, they’ll begin to resent these expectations, these infringements on their royal prerogatives. They may get angry and be defiant. They may even tell their parents, **“You’re not the boss of me!”**

And so it goes through life. We all have things we’re expected to do or be or say that we’d rather not. I for one would rather not rake leaves every fall. You can probably think of lots of expectations you’d really rather weren’t there. But we don’t get a choice. That’s living as a human being. Reality expects things from us. And Almighty God, the Ultimate Reality, expects things from us too. But often our response to him is like the two-year-old’s: **“You’re not the boss of me!”** We all have times when we think or behave as though we were the ultimate authority in our lives. But of course, we’re not.

Like last week’s gospel reading, this week’s is taken from Matthew 22. If you remember, I pointed out that at the beginning of this chapter, Jesus tells a little allegory that annoys the Pharisees. He says, **“Many are called, but few are chosen,”** referring to them. As a result, both the Pharisees and the Sadducees try to trap him with trick questions. Last week we heard the Pharisees ask Jesus if it’s lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not. The lectionary leaves out Jesus’ next encounter, with the Sadducees, who describe a ridiculous scenario in which a woman is married to seven brothers in turn as each one dies off. Then they ask whose wife she’ll be in the resurrection. They

don't believe in the resurrection. Jesus responds that there's no marriage in the resurrection.

And then today we have this lawyer, associated with the Pharisees, ask Jesus, **“Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”** And of course, he responds with what we call the Summary of the Law: love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.

It's important to realize that all of the conflicts Jesus has in the gospels are with very religious people. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were deeply devoted to the Scriptures and the life and worship of Israel. They were highly educated in the Law, and highly disciplined in their personal lives. Devotion to God and the worship of God were at the center of their lives. So why was Jesus in constant conflict with them?

I think it was because in the process of becoming deeply religious people, these leaders drifted into the notion that they were in control. They clearly understood what God's expectations of them were. They devoted themselves to studying and obeying the 613 different commandments in the Law of Moses. But somewhere along the line they got the idea that they could meet these expectations. By thinking they were meeting God's expectations, they thought they were somehow “in” with God, while people who didn't were “out.” Jesus behaved in ways they considered completely “out” with God. He associated with corrupt and immoral people. He didn't follow their devotional traditions, and so forth. And yet people loved him. He was attracting a huge following among the people. The religious leaders were threatened. So they went about trying to trap him with these trick questions.

Two weeks ago, Elizabeth reflected on the Israelites' worship of the golden calf. She pointed out that when we let our fears get the best of us, we make idols to calm our fears. The religious leaders that Jesus tangled with were afraid that he was going to usurp their position and prestige as the religious leaders of Israel. They had made an idol of their devotion to the Law and their religious traditions. Jesus was threatening their idol.

But Jesus responds to their trick questions in this chapter by appealing to the Law and their religious traditions. He asks them, **“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?”**, meaning “whose descendant is he?” It was established from the Old Testament that he would come from David's line, so they answer, **“The son of David.”** Of course, they meant David, the great king of Israel, not St. David, the Welsh saint your church is named after.

Then Jesus quotes the first verse of Psalm 110 when he says, **“How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴ ‘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?” And of course, this is the end of their trick questions.

But Jesus is doing more here than showing up his opponents with his superior knowledge of the Scriptures so as to stop their bothersome questions. He is claiming that those Scriptures are about himself. He is claiming to be David’s Lord, the One who will sit at God’s right hand. He is claiming to be the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, who is Lord of all things.

For the Pharisees, this was a breathtaking claim. It shut down all their attempts to trap Jesus through his doctrines and beliefs. But what does it mean for us? Scripture tells us that **“at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”** (Philippians 2:10-22 NRSV) We regularly refer to Jesus as **“Jesus Christ our Lord.”** What does that mean for you?

Maybe we don’t say it out loud, but like the two-year-old, our attitude in life is often, **“You’re not the boss of me!”** We don’t like people telling us what we ought to do. We consider ourselves autonomous and independent. Like the religious leaders who badgered Jesus, we think we’re in control—even of our relationship with God.

When I was a new Christian, I took to heart Jesus’ teaching of the Golden Rule: **“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”** (Matthew 7:12) But somehow I got the idea that this meant that if I treated other people the way I wanted to be treated, they would change their behavior and treat me the way I wanted to be treated. Somehow I got the idea that Jesus’ teaching was a way to control other people.

But the truth is we can’t control other people. In fact, we are in control of precious little in this world. And the last thing we are in control of is our relationship with God, try as we might to get him to adjust our lives to our specifications. Like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, we like to think we’re “in” with God because we go to church and do good things for other people. Now please don’t be offended. Please don’t think I’m saying you aren’t good people. But you and I are only good because God makes us that way.

“Jesus Christ is Lord of all to the glory of God the Father.” That means he’s Lord of life, Lord of death, Lord of all the angels, good and bad, and Lord of you and me. And he makes us good by giving us the gift of his own self on the cross for our forgiveness. We can’t earn it, and we don’t deserve it. Without Jesus, we’re in the same position as I was as a senior in high school. We have failed. I had failed Spanish 4, and without it I couldn’t graduate. You need to know that I spoke pretty good Spanish, and

had breezed through the first three years of Spanish, but in the fourth year there was a lot of reading and compositions assigned, and I was lazy, so I didn't do them. On the last day of class, the teacher called me up to her desk and showed me my final grade in her roll book: "F". That meant I wouldn't graduate. But as I stood there she erased it and made it a "D". She said, "Mario, this is a gift." And so I graduated from high school. I hadn't earned it. I didn't deserve it.

My Spanish teacher made me a passing student through her gift. Because he is Lord of all, Jesus makes us good through his gift of his death on the cross. As long as we're in this world, we'll be tempted to say "**You're not the boss of me!**" to God and to our circumstances. But when we are, we need to remember that Jesus is Lord of our salvation because he loves us that much. Amen.