



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

A CHURCH FOR THINKING PEOPLE

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Matthew 22.34-38

When the religious leaders gathered together, one of them asked Jesus a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 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."

Long before I came to New England Church, now over 31 years ago, I appreciated the byline by which this church has identified itself for the past 50 years, namely "a caring church for thinking people." We have evaluated its use from time to time in our long-range planning, and each time we come to the conclusion that it is more than just a slogan, but a way of being. We strive to be a caring church as well as a thinking church, and for the most part, I think it is a fair descriptor of who we are and who we attempt to become.

My experience in church work has often found churches that are caring; that seems to be part and parcel of what most churches strive to be. But many churches, especially the one in which I grew up, has not done so well in the thinking part. The church of my youth and several in my college years were churches that had all the answers. There were answers to every question; there were solutions to every incongruity that could be offered, whether of a theological or biblical nature. But as I became more discerning in later years, I realized that many of the answers were not honest answers and many defenses of theological principles were shams. The slogan in those situations was, as theologian Brett Younger comments: the bible says it; I believe it; that settles it. There was no room for thinking—inside or outside the box—because those churches were certain of everything.

There has always been—and there will always be—struggles between the relationship of faith and learning, between the Bible and science, between doubts and certainties. I am glad to have moved from the church of the certain to the church of the questioning, as Brett Younger calls that journey. And I'm glad to have found my way into this church that values thinking as much as it values caring.

The religionists of Jesus's day, though very learned, often used their understanding of scripture and tradition to distance themselves from those less fortunate. They assessed Jesus as one trying to open the door between the elite and the commoner. They tried many times to trap him into exposing what they thought to be a blasphemous doctrine. Jesus's way upended the people with certainties in favor of those who were uncertain enough to ask questions and consider alternatives. "Which is the most important commandment in the law?" they wanted to know. If he picked one, they could accuse him of ignoring the others. But Jesus, being witty of mind, cleverly avoided their trap by responding with insight into the obvious, something with which they could not argue.

“Love God with all your heart, and soul, and mind,” Jesus said. And over the millennia since that statement was uttered, the faithful have tried to honor it. But all too often the church emphasized the heart and soul part, but was suspicious of the mind part. Using one’s mind to discern the finer points of faith is often threatening to those who don’t want to push past the barrier of accepted tradition. But rarely are we threatened by knowledge; it’s what we don’t know—our ignorance—that ends up getting in the way of faithful discipleship. By way of example, here’s a story.

Around the beginning of the 10th century, Mexican bank robber Jorge Rodriguez was making quite a name for himself by sneaking across the Texas border, robbing Texas banks, and then running back to Mexico. An outcry developed, so the Texas Rangers sent out a posse. One afternoon a Ranger saw Jorge sneaking across the border with a sack under his arm. He followed Rodriguez back to his hometown and into a bar to relax.

The Texas Ranger slipped in, got the drop on him, put a gun to his head and said, “Jorge Rodriguez, I know who you are. I’m a Texas Ranger. I’ve come to say that if you don’t give back all the money you’ve robbed from Texas banks, I’m going to blow your brains out.” Unfortunately, Jorge didn’t understand English and the Ranger didn’t know Spanish, so they were at an absolute verbal impasse.

A boy who was watching it all stepped forward and said, I’ll translate. I know Spanish and English.” So the boy translated the ranger’s threat.

Jorge got down on his knees, began to shake, and said, “Tell the big Texas Ranger that I have not spent a cent of the money. If he will go to the town well, face north, count down five stones, and pull it out, all the money is there. I haven’t lost a cent. Tell him.”

A wry look came over the boy’s face. He turned to the Ranger and said, “Jorge Rodriguez is a brave man. He says he is ready to die.” Often when we think we know enough, we can lose big time when challenges come. (Brett Younger, “Loving God with All Your Mind”)

Because the church has been unwilling over two millennia to trust knowledge that comes through science, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and other academic disciplines, people have been put to death or condemned to the outer edges of society. It has been knowledge of biblical texts interpreted in context that has been the catalyst for change; it has been a willingness to see that the God of the bible is also the God of science, the God of psychology, the God of common sense and human decency. Inclusivity has come from using our mind in conjunction with our heart and soul. And if human nature clashes with theological understanding, we’d better be doing some critical thinking about how to resolve the discrepancies in favor of people over doctrine.

The title given Jesus most often in the New Testament is “teacher.” Not lord or master, but teacher. If we don’t include our minds in our love for God, we end up worshipping simple ideas about God rather than humbling ourselves before the Divine Infinite. When we use our individual and collective brains God gave us, we learn to factor in a lot of uncertainty. We begin to ask harder questions. We begin to embrace the complexities of life and invite others to join us on the quest.

Today we are being called to support this church that values loving God with all our heart and all our soul and equally with all our mind. I hope that you will appreciate this goal here at New England Church enough to give generously so we can continue the good work of being a caring church for thinking people as well as a thinking church for caring people. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Creator of all that is and all that is to come, Light of all light and Truth of all truth, we place ourselves humbly in the presence of your universal and all-inclusive love, boldly claiming our place in the scheme of a holy evolution that pulses with the rhythms of the universe. We are amazed at the intricacies of the largest pieces of this puzzle of life, and awed at the grandeur of the smallest minutia of creation. It is impossible for our finite minds to comprehend the stardust that is in the very cells of our bodies and the energy of the big bang still pulsing in our blood even as it serves on the edge of the universe to create new solar systems.

We find ourselves once again in a place where we can explore the meaning of life's mysteries, where our connection with one another gives purpose to all the statistics that stagger our minds, where our value systems are honed and focused in the complexities of a changing and challenging world, and our caring evolves in the challenges that force us to grow or die.

We are grateful for this church, for the people in it who care for us, for the opportunities to think through our faith even as we embrace the unknown mysteries with honest questions. Here we can be honest about our doubts, explore life through all the facets of your being—from science and art, to anthropology and mathematics; from psychology and philosophy to the culinary arts and geology. We see you in each of these disciplines that reveal a part of your being. We see you as well in the bright eyes of infants and the wizened insight of the elderly. We see you at play across the street at Blackhawk Park and in the excitement of costumed children. We know you in part through the caring shoulder of a friend upon which we can lean and in the shared tear of a caring neighbor. We see you at every party, every funeral, every holiday parade. And we are grateful.

And here we are once again challenged to offer our support to this church that for 160 years has provided education for young people, mission outreach for thousands upon thousands, a preschool that helps kids learn how to share toys rather than hoard them, musicians who connect us to that unnamable holiness at the center of our souls, for the common bond between diverse personalities and differing ideologies, for the quiet moments and shards of color light that light up this room and our spirits. Give us generous spirits as we make the commitments that will sustain this important facet of our lives.

And may we go out to foster peace among the nations; love among enemies; hope amid despair; light amid darkness; and life amid death. We pray this in the name of the one who makes life abundant, amen.