

## Three-Part Harmony

This strange and perhaps confusing gospel lesson is really a song in three-part harmony.

There are three quite distinct pieces to this lesson, and each one helps explain the other.

Since Jesus is always talking about the last being first, let's start with the last of the three pieces.

These last few weeks, we've been hearing lots of questions by the religious big shots coming at Jesus.

Today, Jesus has a question for them: about whether the Messiah is or is not the son of King David, that greatest of Jewish Kings, who reigned during the golden age of Israel.

Now, hold on for a second.

Fight that urge to let your eyes glaze over.

Hold off on that daydream for just a second!

Because while it's hard for us to relate to this question, it was an aching hope, a stubborn dream, that someday, a warrior Messiah would come, throw off and throw out the Romans, and a new Israel would be born.

That the Messiah is or isn't the son of the late, great King David may not tickle your fancy, but to the Jewish people, exhausted by the weight of occupation, the Messiah as the son of David means everything.

Think of our Hawaiian brothers and sisters living when the Queen was taken prisoner, who perhaps felt a yearning for one like Kamehameha the Great to rise up and take back the land.

There are those who treasure that very hope today.

I remember my dear friend Harry Lake pointing out the sleeping giant on Kauai, telling this east coast haole boy that someday that giant will wake up and take these islands back for its native peoples.

He had tears in his eyes when he said that to me.

The same tears the Jewish people had as they longed for the son of King David to rescue them.

It is this intense desire for a liberator that get the people of Jesus' day out of bed each morning.

It's what sustains them through otherwise horrific lives.

A warrior king who brings political emancipation.

And it is these hopes, those dreams, that Jesus dashes.

No wonder they want to kill him.

"The Messiah is not David's son," Jesus says; in other words, the Messiah is not a warrior king.

Your hopes, he tells the stunned, then silenced Pharisees, are misguided.

Misguided because, with warrior kings, there is still war.

With warrior kings there is still "us" against "them."

There are still circles drawn, with some on the inside, some on the outside.

Walls are built.

Weapons are pointed.

That's what you get with a warrior king.

With Jesus, you don't get a warrior king; you get the second part of this three-part harmony.

Here it is:

"Love God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul."

Not the Pentagon.

Not the president.

Not the latest American Idol.

Not even our own tribe.

Not even our own kind.

But God.

Jesus shifts the focus, shifts the center of gravity: from power to trust.

Jesus shifts the focus, shifts the center of gravity: from pretending we are in control -- to that great surrender to the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

These are Parts One and Two of today's great three-part harmony.

Part One: The Messiah is not a warrior.

Part Two: Love God.

And now Part Three.

The hardest part of all: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Without a doubt, this is the hardest.

Harder than the dashed hopes that Messiah is not a warrior king.

Harder even than to love God.

Because if I'm going to love my neighbor, I can't stay the way I am today.

I have to change.

It's easy to love God just the way I am.

Just take a look at the various pictures of Jesus and you will find that over the years, Jesus tends to look like whoever is in charge.

Too often, what we worship is the face in the mirror.

And I'm pretty fond of that face!

How about you?

But love my neighbor?

It's an idea that began in the Book of Leviticus, the third book of the Old Testament.

But then Jesus did something to it.

He tied it up tightly with, of all things, the love of God.

Love of God and love of neighbor become two sides of the very same coin.

How rude!

Rude because Jesus should know that my neighbor usually has sharp elbows, an agenda that's different than mine, and faults that he is quite blind to.

Most days, to tell you the truth, he doesn't smell that great either!

My neighbor, to put it bluntly, is more often than not, a pain in the neck.

So thanks so much Jesus for tying up my talk about loving God with my walk of loving the fellow beside me in line.

In Luke's version of Jesus' encounter with this very same lawyer, the lawyer asks Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?"

And Jesus responds with the story of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus doesn't give him a definition of "neighbor" even though that's what the lawyer wants, because with definitions, you get lines, you get "us" versus "them."

Instead, Jesus answers with a question: "To whom *are you* a neighbor?"

And it is to this question that I wish to speak today.

Particularly as it affects our common life at St. Elizabeth's.

To whom are we a neighbor?

I had a dream this week about our Bible Study class.

How's that for being on the job 24/7?!

In my dream we had formed a committee to advise Jesus about how he should act when certain folks crossed his path.

Our marching orders were to follow the dictates of common sense, reasonableness, safety, and, of course, avoiding liability.

The first question our committee considered was what should Jesus do with the man with leprosy who was begging for a cure.

We advised Jesus NOT to touch him, since the touch might spread the disease, and even if Jesus was willing to risk it, it's not fair to possibly infect his disciples.

Plus, Jesus didn't know this guy from Adam.

The guy couldn't pay for the cure, he wanted a freebie.

And, we thought, if Jesus healed him, how many others will come by looking for a handout?

Our committee advised Jesus to reject the request and refuse healing to the man with leprosy.

We next considered the Roman soldier who begs for a cure for his dying servant.

We also advised against this.

The soldier was a foreigner, an occupier, and clearly just wanted to make sure his servant keeps up the cooking and ironing in the fashion the soldier is accustomed to.

We advised Jesus to reject this call for help since it was not only risky (after all, who needs to be called a Roman collaborator?) but he is probably just using Jesus.

The last to come before our board was Peter's mother-in-law.

Because she is the mother-in-law of one of our members, we advised Jesus to heal her, and, just as we expected, as soon as she felt better, she jumped up and made lunch for everyone.

She gave back, returning favor for favor!

In my dream, Jesus laughed our first two suggestions and promptly ignored us.

He healed Peter's mother-in-law not because she was an insider, or because she cooked lunch, but because, like the other two, she simply needed the help.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a long time Episcopal priest says:

"God is not in the business of protecting us from harm, and no amount of good behavior will keep us safe. For evidence of this, see the cross."

"Instead, God is in the business of restoring us to life, which may involve some painful procedures."

"If we are willing to go through it, and the operation is successful, our lives will not belong to us anymore."

"We will be God's gift to the world, and our 'to do' lists will have no end."

"If the operation is really successful, our good works will get us killed."

"P.S. Every day will be filled with fresh astonishment and we will never, never, get bored."

B.B.Taylor, *God in Pain*, (1998) 134.

And so, we open our church doors every day to those who wish to come and sit in the nearer presence of God.

We open our hall to all who ask, whether they deserve it or not, whether we are being used or not.

There is no other way and still claim to be followers of Jesus.

"What Jesus is telling us is that if we do everything in our power to protect our lives the way they are – if we successfully prevent change, prevent conflict, prevent pain – then at the end, we will find that we had no life at all."

"But if we hate our lives in this world, which as far as I am concerned means if we hate all the ways we cheapen our lives, by chasing comfort, safety, and superiority in this world – if we hate that enough to stop it and start chasing God instead – then there will be no end to the abundance in our lives." Id. At 63.

Such is the life lived in God's three-part harmony.

Part One: Love God.



Part two: My love for God is proved exclusively in my love for my neighbor.

Part three: The Messiah is a suffering servant who gives to all who ask.

May our daily lives sing and move and be glad as we dance to the music of this sacred, three-part harmony.

+amen.