

“On Throwing One’s Whole Self In”

Matthew 22:34-46

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In so many of the Gospel texts, we find the religious authorities of the day challenging Jesus on his knowledge of Scripture, on his authority to be teaching, and on his very identity. And on each of these occasions, Jesus rises to what we might call ‘higher ground.’

In the lesson for today, those in authority press Jesus on the question of the Greatest Commandment. He is quick to reply. The greatest commandment is this: love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. In other words, Love God with all you’ve got. Or, as I like to say, ‘Throw your whole self in!’ This response silenced Jesus’ challengers. Indeed, this response halts all of us in our tracks, and causes us to reflect on the matter of throwing my whole self into loving God. What could that really mean? As the tennis great, John McEnroe, once shouted at an umpire, “You can’t be serious?”

The thing is: Jesus was absolutely serious! It is providential that this particular text appears in the lectionary on our Gratitude Sunday, the Sunday we turn in our pledge cards, the Sunday we are asked to ponder the question: what does it mean for me, in this moment, at this time in history, to throw my whole self into loving God? We all have to answer this question for ourselves. I can tell you what it means for me, but we all have to do our own wrestling with this question.

For me, loving God with all I've got, throwing my whole self in, has a lot to do with loving children, with opening doors for children who have found many doors closed. It means so much to me when I look out my office window at 8:30 in the morning to see children walking up the ramp into our pre-school at High Street School. They are greeted there by teachers who engage them in stories and in values and in music and in hopefulness. Last year, I got to be a reader in our pre-school. I considered this a high privilege. Taking time out to read to children is a form of loving God with all you've got. I still remember the smiles on their faces.

It means so much to me that several of our church members are literacy volunteers in Hartford area public schools. Adults who could be playing tennis or a round of golf are teaching inner-city children how to read, how to discover themselves and the world beyond themselves. To be a literacy volunteer is to love God with all you've got!

It means so much to me that our own Mission Team allocates funding for orphans living in Malawi. At the St. Mary's Orphanage, orphaned children are cherished and fed and schooled. They receive excellent medical care. They are known by name: Mpatso, Innocent, Ntendre, and Moyo. Years ago, we were able to send enough money to build an additional house on the orphanage grounds to shelter an additional 16 children. We got to name that house: Numba ya Moyo; which means 'house of life.' To support these children in the Great Rift Valley is to love God with all we've got.

For me, throwing my whole self in means being one of the Confirmation teachers. It means showing up on Wednesday nights to support teenagers as they wrestle with their questions of faith; as they struggle to know who they are and to whom they belong; as they pursue a spiritual journey that takes them into the world of prayer and into the

realm of mystery; and into the very presence of God. Often, in our Confirmation classes, I will leap out of my chair to congratulate a student on voicing a wise insight or revealing a moment of brilliance or raising a question that helps us all go a little deeper into the subject for that evening. Anyone who works with teenagers in any setting: be it a Wednesday School class, a mission trip, a soccer team, an AP Biology class, a scout troop, or a marching band is throwing one's whole self into loving God. If you haven't made that discovery yet, be in touch with me!

When I think of throwing my whole self in, of loving God with all of my heart and all of my soul and all of mind; I think of making out my pledge card. I really do. I think, 'how much can I possibly afford to contribute to my church? How much can I possibly afford to support my church's ministry with children and youth? How much can I possibly sacrifice?

When those religious authorities challenged Jesus to articulate the greatest commandment, they got more than they bargained for. They got a reply that forced them to reflect on what it really means to love God with everything they had. I suspect they had never really reflected on the meaning of that commandment. Now is the time for us to do that reflecting. So I leave us with this essential question: In this moment in history, what does it mean for each of us to throw our whole selves in, to love God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind? It's in the wrestling with that question that we realize we are living in the greatest of hope! Amen.

