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## ***“Slowly Won”***

*John 15:1-17*

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“Two shall become one, just as Christ is one with the church.”

This line, adapted from Genesis 1, is often spoken in traditional wedding services. Obviously, “two becoming one” does not mean married people become the same person or even mirror images of each other. In premarital counseling and in weddings, I frequently quote something Soren Kierkegaard said in the book, *Either Or*: “The key to a happy marriage is for two people to live together without destroying the mystery of the other.” As with faith in God, when you think that you have the other person all figured out, you have violated their personhood.

And yet, there is something to the notion that over the course of a long and healthy marriage, two people begin to share a brain. They develop a shared wisdom about things—a wisdom neither one would have come to independently of the other. This wisdom is forged less by the winning of arguments than by the instruction of love. I remember a man telling me, “My wife loved arranging flowers. It was her thing and I supported her. I didn’t realize how much I had come to love flower arrangements until after she died.”

The instruction of love. Isn’t that how minds and hearts are best won?

Consider Jesus and his followers. I’m about to read something Jesus says at the last meal he has with his disciples before he is arrested. Jesus knows he has only this last opportunity to speak his heart. He wants to make it count. It lasts for four chapters. The part I will read is the most important thing he has to say, his deepest wish, his fervent hope for what they will do when he is gone from them.

Listen for the Word of God as if it is God’s loving instruction to you.



## John 15:12-17

<sup>12</sup>“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup>I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The Word of the Lord!

**Thanks be to God!**

How many times have you won someone over by arguing with them? If you’re good at it, maybe you could have taught Jesus a thing or two.

When I think through the Gospels, I can think of only one time when in the midst of a debate with someone else who came into the conversation to win that debate that Jesus won someone over—only one instance where the other said something like, “**Wow, you know what? I haven’t thought about it that way but you’re right.**” I’m going to have to step out of the Gospel of John to tell you about it.

Consider Mark 12. It speaks to a series of debates that because they are begun with folks who intend to win and not to learn, are arguments in disguise. A gathering of Jewish leaders who have their own differences with each other but are united in their opposition to Jesus, approach Jesus when he is surrounded by a crowd. They act like they want to have a pleasant exchange of views, but it is pretty obvious they want to demonstrate to those who are listening that they have the greater authority. They are the ones who know what they are talking about.

First comes a Pharisee. “**Tell us this, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?**”

It is a “Gotcha Question.” The Jews, who resent the Roman occupying force, will not want Jesus to answer, “**Yes**”, and the Romans listening in will not want him to answer “**No**.” Jesus asks for a Roman coin, shows them it bears the image of Caesar and says, “**It’s his. Give it back to him. But you have the image of God imprinted on you. Give yourself to God.**”

Brilliant! And sure, Jesus won some over with that answer. Those listening in, who do not have a dog in the fight, might have thought, “**Yeah, maybe paying taxes to whatever government in charge is not the end of the world. But God’s image is in me. I belong to God!**”

But the Pharisee, who might have liked that answer if he had come up with it, did not like it at all because Jesus came up with it and showed him up.

The next who comes is a Sadducee. He has his own “Gotcha Question” because he wants to know about the resurrection and Sadducees don’t believe in life after death. They are proud of being Jews, and maybe believe in God, but are way too smart to believe in anything like perhaps having a life with God beyond what we know right here, right now. They remind me of today’s



New Atheists who go out of their way to try to ridicule those who have faith but lack their training in philosophical arguments and proofs. “Hey Jesus, if a man’s brother dies, and the widow is childless, he should marry the widow, right? Well—now hang with me on this—let’s say there are seven brothers. They just keep dying and she keeps marrying the next, and the next, and the next until she’s married all seven. Who’s her husband in heaven? Huh? Huh? Huh?”

Jesus gives a sideways answer to that question as well. I don’t think it is as brilliant an answer as his first, but I don’t think Jesus is trying to be brilliant. Sometimes you give an answer just to get out of an argument. He basically says that if they are right that God is the God of *their* people—

their ancestors—

the patriarchs of their family and their Jewish identity,

the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob—

then consider this:

God is the God of the living, not the dead.”

Again, folks listening who don’t have an agenda, probably like this answer.

And when I think about my people being God’s people... when I think about my Grandmother Clapp, my Aunt Mary, my sister Jane... when we at Second Presbyterian think about Jack Airheart, Barbara Lemon, Alexa Cannon, Sharon Jones.... we find comfort in what he says. They belong to God, they bear God’s image, and God is the God of the living, not the dead.

But do you think that Sadducee, for whom heaven is a hypothetical anyway, are satisfied? Do you think that the New Atheists are satisfied when someone says they believe their loved ones have a home with God?

The Sadducee can see heads nodding in agreement with Jesus, so they know not to continue with their snark and sarcasm and they withdraw.

Then comes a scribe. He is called a Lawyer in the other Gospels. He is an authority in the Torah Law of God—the Law by which Jews are to live whether they pay taxes to Caesar or not. If Jesus has such a reputation for being a great Bible scholar, then let him answer this question. “Of all the commandments in the Torah, Jesus, which is the greatest?” You can’t give equal importance to all scripture, or genocide would be permitted, slaves would be returned to their masters, and no one could eat on the Sabbath even if they were starving. Scripture has to interpret scripture, so they ask, “Jesus, what is the command by which all other commands are to be judged?”

And Jesus answers him. He says to this scribe in Mark’s Gospel what he says to the disciples at their last meal together in John’s Gospel. “The answer is love. The greatest command is this:

*‘Love God with all that you are—  
and love others as you have been loved.’”*

Actually, he says, “as you love yourself.” I’ll admit that I’m reading what Jesus says in John’s Gospel into his response to the scribe in Mark’s Gospel, because I truly believe our passage from John reveals what Jesus really means when he says to the scribe, “Love others as you love yourself.” If you know what it is to be loved by God, love others *that way*.”



And here, for once, Jesus wins an argument with someone who came into the argument with an agenda.

- He didn't convince the Pharisee or Sadducee, but he convinces this scribe.
- He didn't win the argument with the guy who hosted Jesus in his home but then questioned his keeping company with known sinners, but he wins this scribe over.
- He didn't win the argument with the guy who was offended that his disciples were picking grain on the Sabbath, or the guy offended that he healed a man on the Sabbath, but he wins the argument with this Scribe.
- He didn't win the argument with the devil when he was tempted in the wilderness; the devil who just left for a while till he could tempt Jesus again on the cross, but he actually hears the scribe say this:

“Jesus you are right.”

That sounds like a true miracle to me. That doesn't happen often. This might be the only time that Jesus wins an argument with someone who came into the argument with an agenda. It sounds like a miracle especially in this day and age.

I go back to the question I asked you to consider: What are the odds of an argument being won when minds are already made up? An example: An investigation is being conducted about January 6. Most of you have gathered information already, you've watched the tapes, maybe you've listened to the testimony, and probably you have your own strong conviction... so strong that now you're ready to go to battle with anyone who disagrees. Who can change your mind about what you think happened if they want to have an argument with you? And whose made-up mind do you think you can change by arguing with them?

Minds *can* change, hearts *can* change, but usually not through the judging, shaming, and zero-sum need to win that come with arguments these days. “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear,” Jesus said, assuming that some ears are simply not willing to hear.

That's why I call this exchange with the scribe a miracle. The scribe has an agenda. His ego is involved because he is himself an authority on the Bible. A bunch of people are watching, and it feels like they are spectators in a sporting event watching to see who will win. And yet, when Jesus responds to his question, it is as if someone turns on a light dispelling the darkness. I'm not saying Jesus says something the scribe did not know. The darkness dispelled is this whole adversarial spirit where inquisitors are trying to expose and shame Jesus. And when Jesus says, “You are not far from the kingdom of heaven,” I don't think he is talking about content, that the scribe has almost got it figured out. I think he is talking about he and Jesus finding common ground when the others are trying to sew division.

That's kind of what love does; don't you think? Love draws you out of yourself, causes you to consider life from another's perspective. It establishes a relationship on which, over time, a shared wisdom can be gained.

I've spent a lot of time in Mark's Gospel, but my sermon is based on our passage from John, so let's go back to it now. John's Gospel is very different from the Synoptics in that it is



a Gospel about conversations,  
a Gospel about relationships,  
a Gospel about conversion of minds and hearts that come over time.

Toward the beginning of the Gospel, a Pharisee named Nicodemus approaches Jesus. Unlike the Pharisee who wanted to ask a Gotcha Question about paying taxes to Caesar, this Pharisee comes to Jesus with *genuine curiosity*. He is not like his peers, other Pharisees who assume he is a card-carrying member of their silo and see Jesus as a threat. He doesn't want to have a conversation with Jesus, not a fight. Yet, he's intimidated by his peers and so he comes to Jesus at night.

They talk. They talk about faith—what faith really is. Is it being born again, making some kind of effort to start over in life, to do things differently? Or is it being born from above, being remade by a relationship with God. They go back and forth for a long time—21 verses—and when they are done, we don't know that Nicodemus isn't convinced, but he is intrigued. You get glimpses of Nicodemus changing and growing over time. He shows up two more times in the Gospel,

- first defending Jesus but not yet endorsing him at a meeting with Pharisees,
- and then later helping to bury Jesus in broad daylight.

*He is slowly won.*

Then comes a conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus is a Jew, she is a Samaritan—different race and different culture. They think differently. They believe differently. He's a man and she's a woman so they're not really supposed to have this unchaperoned conversation. And yet, for the entirety of a very long chapter, they stay in conversation, they stay in relationship, they go back and forth. They talk about family. They talk about differences—  
you worship on a mountain,  
we worship at a temple in Jerusalem—

but actively seek to understand each other and find common ground. “**You know,**” Jesus says to her, “**we're going to find a way some day to worship God together. It's going to happen. We'll get there one day.**”

When the chapter is done, we don't know that Jesus has convinced the Samaritan woman of everything, but she tells her neighbors and friends that she would like to introduce them to someone who had such an ability to see through her eyes. It was as if he knew her better than she knew herself. She is being *slowly won*.

There are other long conversations in John's Gospel, including arguments with authorities that don't get anywhere. But the best example of minds and hearts being slowly won is the disciples. Their relationship with Jesus began with his being their rabbi. It takes time for them to learn to see through Jesus' eyes. They don't always get Jesus and Jesus gets frustrated with them.





They hang in there with each other until the day comes when they have won each other over. Jesus can say at that dinner: “We are friends now. You still may not understand everything I’ve tried to teach, but you know I love you. That’s what I want you to show others when I’m gone. I want you to win people over... but not by arguing with them, attacking them, trying to win them by making them lose. I want you to love them as I have loved you.”

This past week, I listened to a podcast of a talk by Simeon Zahl. He suggested that we all have theories about how to change other people’s minds and hearts. He has one simple question to ask of your theory about how to win arguments: “Does it work?”

Remember, he does not ask that question about others who already agree with you. You can win all kinds of followers on Twitter, Instagram, Tik Toc—and you can earn money or exert power or gain control—by becoming a star among your own. But what about winning minds and hearts in conversations? Does it work?

- Shaming others, does that work? Does contempt or demonizing the other work? As fun and often funny as they are, does snark and sarcasm work? Or does all that make the other want to attack back or run away?
- Pre-judging others. Does that work, or does it make others want to hide their sinner self from you?
- Does signaling your virtue to expose another’s flaws, does that work? Or does it make the other find reasons to show you’re a hypocrite (because we’re usually not as virtuous as we sometimes want to let on)?
- Does it work to come at the other with an unpersuadable mindset with your own unpersuadable mindset? Does that work, or does that just push you both to dig in deeper?
- Does it work to cast the debate as Either/Or as if there is no common ground on which to stand?
- Does this work: Does gathering information and making rational arguments work? I say, “Yes,” that works more than other strategies. But research shows that’s effective only when minds are not already made up. When minds are made up, does that just make the other find their own information and construct their own arguments?

Zahl says that St. Augustine got it right so long ago. The best way to get to a person’s head is through the heart. Information is important—the Gospel cannot be about believing lies. Reasoning is important (the Gospel needs to be reasonable). But true transformation of what one believes and values comes of human engagement... which comes of relationship... which comes of love.

At that final meal, Jesus could have said to his disciples, “This is my number one command: Remember everything I taught you and teach others that. Or remember everything I did and told you to do and go do that.” I would not have minded Jesus saying that. We Presbyterians are all about learning and doing. But what he said was, “Love others as I have loved you.” He knew that by way of love minds and hearts can be slowly won.

