



On the Days When I Believe

Matthew 22:34-40

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“Why are you a Christian?” Have you really ever thought about that question? Have you ever been asked to answer that question? ... What did you say? ... What would you say? ...

“Why are you a Christian?”

This is the starting point for Rachel Held Evans in her book, *Wholehearted Faith*.

“Why are you a Christian?”

Over the coming two months, we’re going to be exploring some of the questions, thoughts, and hopes expressed in the writing of Rachel Held Evans, as we gather in worship and in an after-worship book study. I invite you, if you haven’t already, to pick up a copy of the book and read along. We’ll be covering about two chapters of the book each week, so make sure you’re keeping up.

As we begin today, I want you to think about this opening question. “Why are you a Christian?” Or, perhaps stated another way, “Why do you believe?”

Like Evans states in her own examples, one of the reasons I first claimed faith is because of the people who surrounded me in my childhood. I was raised by some amazing people whose lives provided a fount of water that was nourishing to my soul. My parents, at the core of that group, took me to church and provided me the opportunity to immerse myself in and around people of the Christian faith. As a young child, I participated in the church music program with our choral director, Miss Sandra Franklin. Everyone loved Miss Franklin. She was magic with children, and I think most of us came to handbell and choir rehearsal just because we wanted to be around her.

After Miss Franklin left, the church hired a new music director, who went by the name KAS. She was nothing like Miss Franklin. KAS brought with her a funky new style, and allowed us to push beyond some of the formal churchiness Miss Franklin had maintained in the youth choir. We were still very well-rehearsed and offered some amazing music, but KAS selected music that was more modern. She introduced us to some good ‘ole pop-Southern Gospel we had never sung before.

Both music directors created environments that made us want to show up – we wanted to be a part of the church.

My youth director was Brent Bohannon. He was salt of the earth. After piano lessons with Mrs. Irwin, the church organist, I used to hang out in his office for (what seemed like) hours. I was grateful to just

sit in his presence, even if he was only being gracious in letting this pre-teen annoy him while he was trying to close out the work-day.

Growing up in a large church, with some 800 or more people in worship on Sunday mornings, Brent led a youth program that had almost 100 kids at our Sunday evening youth gatherings. When, as many teens do, I started distancing myself from the adults around me, I maintained my commitment to the church because of the friendships I formed on Sunday nights. I couldn't have asked for a closer group of friends to share with while discerning our faith, while living the life of a teenager (with all of its highs and lows), and in wrestling with some of the places where our personal reading of the Bible challenged what we were taught in Sunday School.

It would take me a while to name all the people, peers and mentors, who helped me claim my faith in my teenage years. But my faith started with the people who surrounded me.

But let me be honest, though I give great thanks to all of those who made an impact on my young life so many years ago, I don't talk with many of them anymore. And to be brutally honest, there's a handful I don't want to talk with anymore.

Social media is both a blessing and a curse in this way. It's a joy, because you get to stay in touch with folks you left back home ... and it can be a curse, because ... well, you get to stay in touch with folks you left back home. I've seen the kinds of posts people share, which are at times filled with vitriol and hatred towards others. It's disheartening. And I want nothing to do with it ... or them.

I have had to ask myself, were these really the same people who had inspired me to faith? Did I miss these types of comments and attitudes during our Sunday evening youth gatherings? Did the adults I looked up to always hold these convictions?

I don't ask these questions to come across as "holier than thou." I often question how much I participated in the conversations and activities that furthered an "othering" of people who were different, or that were filled with such hatred toward others. ... No, I name these personal observations to identify that, while relationships and community may help us connect with faith ... while these personal relationships might bring us to the faith ... it is often something greater than our relationships that helps us maintain our faith. It is something greater than friends, family, and neighbor that help us embody *wholehearted faith*.

That something greater, at least for me, is visible in our scripture reading today in Matthew 22.

The story in Matthew 22 begins with a narrative injunction: "When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together."

Both the Pharisees and Sadducees were leaders of the Jewish community. The Sadducees were a wealthier aristocratic group who held firm to the known and comprehensible aspects of Jewish life and the Hebrew law. The Pharisees, while also upholding the law, were more willing to embrace the

unknown spiritual aspects of faith, which included things beyond concrete understanding – such as demons, angels, and the afterlife.

While they had some differences of opinion regarding religious belief, they still shared in their authority of the temple. A threat to one group was a threat to both. And Jesus, in his silencing of the Sadducees, was proving to be a nuisance to them all.

So the Pharisees gathered to test Jesus in hopes that they might prove him to be a false prophet and to redeem the Sadducees of their ridicule.

A lawyer (no offense, I know we have a handful of lawyers in the room, but are we surprised a lawyer would be the one testing Jesus on behalf of the group?) ... a lawyer asked Jesus, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

It’s clear in the way the question is asked that the Pharisees expected Jesus to pull out a single commandment to name as the most important. There are 613 commandments in the Hebrew scriptures, and the Pharisees thought that Jesus would be walking into a trap to try and name any singular commandment as the *most* important.

In his response, Jesus offers a concrete answer. ... What I mean is, Jesus isn’t offering some philosophical response that pulls together ideas from the conglomeration of commandments found in the Hebrew Scripture. He isn’t penning a new law, or trying to summarize all of the law into one new creative and innovative statement.

No, Jesus instead recites two specific texts as they are found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

First, citing Deuteronomy 6:5, which in Judaism is a prayer known as the Shema, Jesus says, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”

You might imagine that the Pharisees started to raise a finger to pick a fight, but Jesus doesn’t stop talking. He continues, this time quoting from Leviticus 19:18, “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments,” Jesus says, “hang all the law and the prophets.”

“In quoting the Shema, Jesus points out that the aim of the law is to orient one’s entire life toward God.”ⁱ But in coupling the two together, Jesus names that one can’t love God without loving that which God loves.

Not only does Jesus refuse to answer the question by naming a singular command, Jesus furthers the answer by saying that all of the commands ... indeed, all of the law and the prophets ... are built upon these *two* commands.

While some argue that in his answer Jesus is replacing the Hebraic law, in reality, Jesus is offering a greater understanding of the full law, saying that the entire law is built upon these two. Everything else must be understood as it allows us to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves.

I indicated earlier that what helps me embody a wholehearted faith is visible in this scripture. Let me clarify with a story. I may have shared this story before, but it's important to this text and to my faith.

When I was a senior in high school, a buddy of mine, Robert, and I wanted to start a new Sunday School class. Only, we didn't want any adults in the class. We wanted to have a youth-led class, where each week one of our class mates would work up a Bible lesson on some topical issue. In fact, it was these two books that we used for our study.

We did some serious Biblical study, combing the scriptures for any applicable texts to the topic of the week. After a few weeks, we were instructed by the Minister of Christian Education to shut the class down, or at least to allow an adult in the room because ... and this is the important part ... they wanted to make sure that what we were learning in that classroom fit a *Wesleyan Theology*. They were afraid that our youth-led, youth-planned, youth-focused class was going to teach someone something Baptist, or perhaps Lutheran, or maybe something even worse. I don't know ... but they feared it wouldn't be Wesleyan.

Now, I want to insert a denominational plug. I am employed as a full-time clergy member of the United Methodist Church, which is part of the Wesleyan heritage. I am a pastor in this church today because, of the options that I could have pursued, I was raised in the Wesleyan tradition, and I have found our methodical approach to Christianity (yes, we're Methodists), and our Wesleyan Theology to be worthwhile.

But, and I apologize in advance to my Bishop, for all that I support and agree with in our Wesleyans heritage, I am not convinced we have it *all* right. We have over 1200 pages of rules in our United Methodist Book of Discipline, and I'm not sure that every rule or ruling of law in our denomination is right, just, and good.

And this is why I love Jesus' response to the Pharisees. This is why this text helps me have wholehearted faith.

The Pharisees were the ones who were supposed to know it all. They were the ones who were supposed to have it all figured out. They were the ones who were in the place of educating the rest of the Jews on matters of faith and faithfulness. And this one guy, this one so-called rabbi, this non-Pharisaic entity comes into the temple and is teaching in a way that went against their understanding of Jewish Theology ... and they tried to shut him down. They said, you need an adult in the room because we're not so sure you're teaching fits our theology.

They wanted to shut Jesus down because they didn't agree with him.

They tried to trap him, to make him look a fool, by asking, “What is the greatest commandment in the law?”

And Jesus said, of all the laws you could choose from ... of the 613 texts that make up the Full List of Mitzvot – the Hebrew law, there are two on which all the law and the prophets hang – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, ... and love your neighbor as yourself.” ... Every other teaching, every other rule, every other prophecy, every other instruction, every other action, every other hope hinges upon these two: that we love God, and that we love one another as we love ourselves.

This is why I have faith. This is why I claim to faith wholeheartedly – because even to the most ardently faithful members of the Jewish community ... even to those who were supposed to know it all ... even to those who, as community leaders had led so many to faith before ... Jesus claimed that there is still a better way. Even to those who were supposed to know it all, Jesus says, you don’t quite understand.

Jesus calls us to love, and as Rachel Held Evans so faithfully notes, love does not lead us to create “safe” cloisters in which to love. “In fact,” she goes on, “it’s the opposite. Love tears down the walls and it beckons us out into woodlands of human existence.”ⁱⁱ

My faith is firm because I see a Christ who calls us, even the most faithful and obedient of us, to acknowledge that there is still something greater available than the systems and structures we have set up for ourselves. We have a Christ who calls us to a greater way of living than even the church has made available. We have a Christ who declares that our broken and fractured society is not all that God has desired for us, and that there is something greater to be working toward.

In conclusion of her opening chapter, Held Evans writes, “Perhaps the better story to tell ourselves is that the struggle toward love is worth it. It moves us out of the fragmentation that has marked so many of our lives. And it compels us toward the wholeness for which God made us - and that God embodies.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In a desire for wholehearted faith, I don’t think the goal is rote and blind acceptance of the way things are. I don’t expect that everyone one of us holds the same convictions on every topic or matter of discussion. I don’t even think that we all have to have the same beliefs around every theological topic of debate. But, I do think that no matter where we are, no matter what convictions we hold, no matter what divergence of the Christian world we came from, that we are all expected – by Christ – to frame all we do in love. A love of God, a love of our neighbor, and a love for ourselves. My faith is rooted in the belief that this is possible – that a greater love still exists, and that together, we can share in love to make this world a little more like God desires. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Tim Beach-Verhey. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Rachel Held Evans. *Wholehearted Faith*. HarperOne, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Held Evans.