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**It All Comes Down To This**  
(Matthew 22:34-46)

**Grace is Everywhere**

A strange thing happened last week as I sat up here: I realized as I looked out that I'm getting to the point where I know more faces than I do not. I remember when I first preached and all I saw was this mass of new people. When I found out I'd be sticking around, I panicked and wondered "what do I do now?"

As you have probably experienced, you do not want to make a mess of things when you come into a new job situation. Sometimes I recognize the need wisdom, direction that comes from another source, a rock higher than I: Hollywood.

Well, France's version of it, at least. I dug up a movie called *Diary of Country Priest*. It is a classic piece of French cinema about a Catholic priest's first assignment to a rural parish. When I saw it, I thought "how fitting." Not that I'm a Catholic priest, but being from Minneapolis, driving into Saint Paul can feel like a journey into the country.

Not to ruin the movie for anyone, the plot is essentially: everything the priest does fail, no one likes him, and he dies. Don't look for it in the comedy section. You may not wish to look for it at all.

I, on the other hand, became obsessed with it, wondering how such a dour little movie had any relevance to the ministry. I watched it again, this time with the audio commentary running. I read the book. I read commentaries on the book and on the movie. Sure enough, it all came down to one thing. Something applicable not just to Catholic priests in rural France, but to all people who seek to do the will of God in whatever forum of life they operate.

It all comes down to this: the priest's final words, upon considering his failures and missed opportunities are "tout est grace." Grace is everywhere. He had tried to construct programs for his church, he wanted to do so many things, and he worried for the very souls of his parishioners, but the house of cards he tried to build with this parish collapsed when his plans, his expectations were not met.

Ultimately, he realized, what mattered is that he loved: loved God and loved the people with whom he came into contact.

### **The House of Cards Then...**

Jesus' encounter with the church leaders in today's gospel passage should have been some comfort to this priest. Throughout the history of God's interaction with the Israelites, there formed around the relationship a house or wall of cards made up of laws and regulations, some having their origination in the God, others probably added as time went by, to the point that observance of the law measured the quality of one's relationship with God, a ludicrous measure, but one that became institutionalized.

So the question asked was, "Jesus, of all of these laws, or all of these commandments, which is the greatest." The right answer I suppose would have been "they all depend on each other" or "no one law or commandment is greater than the other." To answer otherwise would indict Jesus because it would pull at this house of cards, causing it to collapse, exposing Jesus for the troublemaker they wanted him to be.

Jesus must have known it was a trick question because no where in the text does he say "thanks for asking." Nevertheless his response was "Love God. Love one another."

Jesus' response, what we call the "Greatest Commandment," was what they wanted. It suggested he would strip away the layers of laws, rules, and regulations that had been respected and revered for hundreds of years and advocate some sort of anarchy. Revere God, revere one another, was the troublemaker's answer and talk like that ultimately got Jesus executed.

### **...And the House of Cards Now**

I don't blame people for feeling ambivalent toward organized religion. We continue to do today what the Sadducees and Pharisees did then, with nothing but good intentions, often we revere the doctrine, the ideology, the law, the political positions, more than God. It is done in both the liberal and conservative churches.

It is easy to *do* things we interpret as faith. Some traditions hold that if you behave a certain way you are living your faith, others say if you do the right rituals, you are living your faith, still others say if you out doing good for others, you are living your faith. While they may all be correct, whatever the action, it must emanate from, not substitute for, our love of God.

In a New York Times editorial titled "Onward Moderate Christian Soldiers," Episcopal minister and former senator John Danforth says that people of faith have "the right, perhaps the obligation to bring their values to bear in politics." But, he writes, how we translate our faith into concrete actions can be harmful to others and mean-spirited. The only "absolute standard" says Danforth is the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves and that just as it does throughout the Gospels, the love commandment must take precedence over our laws and in the moments of our lives. There is more to being a Christian than being the loudest shouter.

To love is a commandment and it is upon that commandment that all the rest of the law is to be based.

### **A Lesson in Grace**

Tout est grace. Grace is everywhere. In my obsessive search to find the redeeming point in *Diary of a Country Priest*, I discover the author based the character of the priest on St. Therese of Liseaux.

Saint Therese loved the church so much that she tried to become a Carmelite nun when she was nine. She was refused. She tried again at 15, but was refused. On a visit to Rome she got to meet the Pope and she asked him, and again was refused. Finally at the age of 16, Therese was allowed to enter a convent.

The problem with entering the convent at such a young age, however, is that she entered with very little life experience, no history of working with the poor, the hungry, the sick. In fact, once behind the convent walls she realized her life would leave no legacy of great deeds. She resolved to do anything, no matter how small for the love of God, her every action being an offering.

Upon Therese's death at age 26, one of her superiors said that Therese did not really amount to much. But this is the voice of the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the quantifiers.

Therese left the legacy of being an example of someone who maintained a devotion to and love for God, even though the last nine years of her life were spent in a spiritual "dry period." For Therese, the spiritual aridity was not "proof that God does not exist" but paradoxically that God does exist and gives the fortitude to pull through times of pain and of doubt.

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Therese's final words, upon hearing that she would not be able to receive the last rites on her deathbed, were "What does it matter? Tout est grace. Grace is everywhere." She knew love took precedence above law, above ritual.

### **It All Comes Down to This**

To love God, to love one another: It is a hard charge. It is hard enough to believe some days that there is a God that can be known, let alone loved. And certainly, it is hard enough to love others.

We even rely on the grace of God for the love we give, having to ask for the faith and strength to find that love, having to find the faith and strength enough to even ask in the first place. As the country priest writes in his diary "Even the desire to pray is a prayer."

It all comes down to this: God's grace is everywhere and we are free to focus our lives on the sacred work of loving God and one another, in all we say and do.