

Matthew 22:34-40 - Revised Standard Version

The Greatest Commandment

³⁴But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. ³⁵And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” ³⁷And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

The Archer's Dilemma

Archery

There is a maxim in the sport of archery that says, “aim small, miss small.” This means that one should not focus on the entire target, but only on the smallest point that can be seen. So that is to say, don't aim for the bullseye in the target, but the mote of dust in the center of the bullseye.

Archery takes constant practice. You have to be consistent in your draw and release of bowstring. You have to regulate your breathing so your body and mind are working together. You have to learn to quiet your thoughts even when there are distractions nearby.

When you draw your bow and aim, you can miss the mark to the left or to the right. Your shot can be high or low. You can also miss as a result of distance. You might be accurate at 30 yards, but if you move the target out to 50 yards, you will have to change your shot to reflect the distance, or depth of the shot. This means that you have to practice archery at different distances so you can adjust your aim to compensate for the arrow's trajectory. Your aim must encompass height, width and depth.

The dilemma is that small movements of body or manner of releasing the arrow can have large effects on the accuracy of the arrow, especially the farther one is away from the target.

Aiming High

Henry David Thoreau wrote, “In the long run [people] only hit what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high.”

In the Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus offers us The Great Commandments. They represent our high target, what we should be aiming at in our life.

The Great Commandments are not just the aim, but the foundation our faith. They place love for God and each other as primary values that we must strive towards.

They are our goal, simplified and clarified to their bare essentials.

How do we see this goal in our everyday lives? Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matt.6:21) How do we frame our vision so that we can discern this Great Commandment in our lives and seek this great treasure?

An Eye for Value

If anyone here likes to forage, and you have been doing it for a while, you have trained your eye to notice the texture of a certain kind of leaf or the color and shape and size of certain mushrooms that may be hidden or overlooked by the average person, but may be incredibly tasty or healthy or medicinal if you know what you are looking for. One of my favorites is a little common garden “weed” called plantain. It is especially good for helping to cure coughs and also very soothing and cooling if you are stung by a bee or wasp and apply the fresh leaf to the sting. We used to get stung in the park every now and then while playing barefoot and plantains became a friendly sight and a comfort for us. Though unnoticed by most, it would “pop out” at us from among the other plants in the parks where we would play. It is a treasured little plant.

I’ve been involved in some yard sales and rummage sales and noticed the people who were collectors — the professional yard sale shoppers. They seem to have the talent to find things of hidden value in amongst the low priced housewares and knick-knacks. These folks trained themselves to see value in things that others tend to overlook. It is a skill. We all have this ability if we choose to develop it.

Whether you are a forager of herbs or trinkets or anything else, you realize that you have to discern what is important and valuable out of the countless things you can see in a grassy field or a yard-sale or anywhere else in the course of the day. As people, we develop a sense of what is valuable in life and train our eyes to seek out and find these things from among everything else. As people, we are constantly sorting through all the things that are presented to us, often unconsciously, and trying to figure out what is of most value. And it is not just things, but this applies to our time and our attention and the way we prioritizing our activities.

How would it be if we had the determined, searching eye of a seeker of trinkets or a forager for herbs, yet plied this skill to our spiritual sense, looking for the Christ in everyone we met, looking for the Holy spirit's presence in our relationships, looking for the Truth in every situation and every message that the world and all its powers hurl our way? Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matt 6:33) That is a promise. Seek what is most valuable, and everything else will be provided. In other words, train your vision to seek the kingdom of God first, and then your aim will be the true aim, and you, like an arrow, will be guided on the right course

Dilemma

In the story of Robin Hood, there is a great scene that depicts an archery contest. Robin competes against a very good archer who places his arrow directly into the bullseye of the target. It would seem to be impossible that Robin would be able to be more accurate than his adversary, yet when he draws and releases his arrow, it flies so straight and true that it splits the other arrow and is imbedded in the center of the center. It is a great image.

How often do you feel like you are so on the mark that you get to the center of the center of things? The big dilemma of the archer is that little errors in posture or vision or concentration have much bigger consequences the farther away the target. It is kind of like that in life. But part of how we learn is through making mistakes. Unlike being able to simply send more arrows downrange at a target to practice our aim, our mistakes in life can have much bigger repercussions. If

we miss the mark in our relationships or in the way we treat ourselves, there can be serious consequences.

The ancient Greek word for missing the mark was “**hamartia**.” That is also the word we find in the Bible for “sin.” To sin is to miss the mark. The simple truth is that we all miss the mark at times. Sometimes we fall short in big things. Sometimes our transgressions are of the smaller variety, but it happens to all of us. That is where we need repentance, which in Greek is “**metanoia**,” which means to change one's mind, or to change course.

In some ways we are like the archer and in some ways we are like the arrow. As archers, we look out into the world and take aim at what we think is valuable — the target—as best we can see it, and try to hit the mark. As arrows, individual human beings moving towards a goal, we are able to correct our course, to readjust our aim, direct ourselves ever closer towards the center, the goal, which, in our spiritual journey, is summed up in the Great Commandment.

The Mark

Sometimes we do what we think is best and it turns out we've caused more harm than good. Sometimes our intentions may be less than noble. Sometimes we say things that hurt others or we may judge or condemn others unduly. Sometimes we spend years on what might turn out to be the wrong track. We can get busy and distracted and neglect the people we love. We can chase a career which is not right for us. We can be pierced with the sorrows of the world and forget to turn to the light of Jesus when times are darkest. There are as many ways to “miss the mark” as there are minutes in the day and ant trails to follow. But we are not to be discouraged. Understanding how and where we have missed the mark is part of our journey of transformation as we move closer towards the mark of the Great Commandment that Jesus embodied for us as our example.

I find it useful to think of scripture as a guide and companion in our spiritual journey. It offers ways to hone our vision and make our aim more true. It offers ways to train our minds and bodies to follow Jesus Christ more completely with our heart, mind, strength and soul.

2 Timothy 3: 16-17 says, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Proverbs 2:20 says, "Therefore walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the just."

In our call to worship from Psalm 1, we are encouraged to delight in the law of the Lord, and meditate on it both day and night.

Scripture leads us to look at the height and breadth of situations and to search the depths of what is true. We are called to practice constantly, seeking to aim for the center of the center of the target. The symbol of the cross in its many forms, is like a target, pointing towards height, width and in its center, infinite depth and wholeness and a resurrected life.

Our life's work is to seek God's kingdom. We do it through prayer, through learning when we miss the mark and through following the two Great Commandments in all things. So aim for the highest mark of all, to Love God and each other as Jesus loved, and in so doing, may your aim every be true.
Amen