

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – October 29, 2017

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Matthew 22:34-40

FOR REFLECTION

“In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no one by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philipp and Amsdorf, the Word ... did everything.”

- Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Question Authority

You may have seen the notice on the bulletin board in back that says, “Think for yourself, your minister might be wrong.” I post that at every church I serve. I am a great believer in individuals doing theology and exploring ideas for themselves. That doesn’t mean we do this in a vacuum. But in dialogue together our shared ideas might lead us to a larger truth, a greater meaning, a wider understanding of G-d, scripture, the world.

Martin Luther, the father of the Christian Reformation, believed the same thing. With the help of the printing press and scripture available in the language of the people, he felt that the church hierarchy did not have a monopoly on interpretation. He also felt that the church should stop selling indulgences (the paying off of sins so one could get into heaven). But 500 years ago, on the 31st of October, 1517, when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany, he had no intentions of splitting away from the Catholic Church.

The Theses were written as propositions to be argued in a formal academic disputation, though there is no evidence that such an event ever took place. In the heading of the Theses, Luther invited interested scholars from other cities to participate... Luther posted the Ninety-five Theses on the eve of All Saints' Day, the most important day of the year for the display of relics at All Saints' Church.

Luther's theses were intended to begin a debate among academics, not a popular revolution.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ninety-five_Theses

But as we can see, the church hierarchy was in no mood to have its authority questioned and would not engage in debate. So instead of Catholic reform we had a split and the Protestant church began to evolve and divide like biological mitosis.

If we look at today's text, we can see that there is precedent for this. Like Martin Luther, Jesus had no intentions of splitting away from Judaism. In fact, in traditional Jewish fashion, he was engaging in critique and dialogue about the laws and practices of the religious hierarchy. He has done his homework, he understands the law and prophets – and he has come to a different interpretation than the current leadership.

The Pharisees ask him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" And he replies, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

What he does here is align himself with the House (or school) of Hillel rather than the House of Shammai.

Rabbi Hillel was born (according to tradition) in Babylon around 110 BCE, and died 10 CE when Jesus was a boy (in Jerusalem) at the age of 120.

...when it is said of Hillel and other key figures that they lived for 120 years, ...this is not factual but a way of saying that these teachers followed in the footsteps of Moses who was 120 years old at his death (Deuteronomy 34:7).

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hillel/>

He is associated with the development of the Mishnah and the Talmud.

Renowned within Judaism as a sage and scholar, he was...the founder of a dynasty of Sages who stood at the head of the Jews living in the Land of Israel until roughly the fifth century of the Common Era. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_the_Elder

Rabbi Shammai was born 50 BCE and died 30 CE just before Jesus was killed. He was an:

...important figure in Judaism's core work of rabbinic literature, the Mishnah. Shammai was the most eminent contemporary and the halakhic opponent of Hillel, and is almost invariably mentioned along with him. Although they were contemporaries, Hillel was nearly sixty years old at the time of Shammai's birth in ~50 BCE. Shammai founded a school of his own, known as the House of Shammai, which differed fundamentally from that of Hillel...

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shammai>

Hillel and Shammai, were contemporaries paired together by Jewish tradition as archetypal opposites: **Hillel the tolerant and liberal “loose constructionist” of the Law, Shammai the exacting and inflexible “strict constructionist.”**

In one story about them, a gentile comes to both and asks, with the obvious intention of provoking them, to be taught the whole Torah while standing on one leg. Shammai is indeed provoked and gives the man an angry whack with a

measuring rod. Hillel replies, “That which is hateful to you, do not unto another: This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary — [and now] go study.”

<http://forward.com/culture/14250/the-rest-of-the-rest-is-commentary-02564/>

When Jesus says, Love G-d and “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets...” he is repeating in the positive what Hillel said in the negative: “That which is hateful to you, do not unto another: This is the whole Torah...” He is siding with the less literalistic and strict, more liberal and tolerant interpretation of the law – as he does in most situations in the Gospels.

He does omit the phrase “The rest is commentary – go study.” But it may be inferred as it is understood in Judaism that study and the debate of interpretations is at the heart of their practice.

There are several theories about why these two houses – Hillel and Shammai – arose in the first place. Of course, it’s complex – but one contributing factor is possible class differences:

Louis Ginzberg (1873-1953) advanced the ingenious thesis that the two houses really represented two social classes: the House of Shammai legislating for the wealthy landowners, the ‘patricians’, the House of Hillel for the working classes, the ‘plebeians’...

The two houses, each legislating for a different social class, are bound to interpret Scripture in the way they do, since the position of women [for instance] among the aristocracy is far better than among the lower social classes.

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<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hillel/>

And if we go back to our Martin Luther, we can also say he was advocating for the lower social classes. If one only got into heaven by buying indulgences for sins, of course only the rich would occupy G-d’s eternal home. If only the wealthy church hierarchy was allowed to interpret scripture, the common person was left without recourse or agency in their religious life.

He was standing with the House of Hillel – just as Jesus did.

May we, in their tradition, continue to Question Authority and think for ourselves.

May we engage in study and dialogue, respecting differences, deepening our understanding of G-d and one another.

May we do unto others as we would have them do unto us...

And that which is hateful to us, [let us] do not unto another...

Matthew 22:34-40

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

37 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.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2017/01/reformation-500/>

Hillel (Hebrew: הלל; variously called Hillel HaGadol, or Hillel HaZaken, Hillel HaBavli[1] or HaBavli,[2] was born according to tradition in Babylon c. 110 BCE, died 10 CE[3] in Jerusalem) was a famous Jewish religious leader, one of the most important figures in Jewish history. He is associated with the development of the Mishnah and the Talmud. Renowned within Judaism as a sage and scholar, he was the founder of the House of Hillel school for Tannaim (Sages of the Mishnah) and the founder of a dynasty of Sages who stood at the head of the Jews living in the Land of Israel until roughly the fifth century of the Common Era.

He is popularly known as the author of two sayings: (1) "If I am not for myself who is for me? And being for my own self, what am 'I'? And if not now, when?"[4] and (2) the expression of the ethic of reciprocity, or "Golden Rule": "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."[5]

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_the_Elder

Shammai (50 BCE – 30 CE, Hebrew: שמאי) was a Jewish scholar of the 1st century, and an important figure in Judaism's core work of rabbinic literature, the Mishnah.

Shammai was the most eminent contemporary and the halakhic opponent of Hillel, and is almost invariably mentioned along with him. Although they were contemporaries, Hillel was nearly sixty years old at the time of Shammai's birth in ~50 BCE. Shammai founded a school of his own, known as the House of Shammai, which differed fundamentally from that of Hillel; and many of Shammai's direct sayings are thought to be embodied in those handed down in the name of his school.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shammai>

[The Rest of 'The Rest Is Commentary'](#)
[Philologos](#), September 24, 2008

In the September 10 issue of The New York Times, the well-known journalist Jeffrey Goldberg (whose career got its start in these pages) published a long and grim op-ed column about the dangers of a terrorist nuclear attack on American soil. Compared with such a prospect, he wrote, "Everything else — Fannie Mae, health care reform, energy independence, the budget shortfall in Wasilla, Alaska — is commentary."

The phrase "everything else is commentary," or, as it is more frequently encountered, "the rest is commentary," has in recent years become such a part of the English language that many people are unaware of its Jewish roots. Yet these origins are indisputable and are clearly traceable to the talmudic story about the two first-century-BCE rabbinic sages, Hillel and Shammai, contemporaries paired together by Jewish tradition as archetypal opposites: Hillel the tolerant and liberal "loose constructionist" of the Law, Shammai the exacting and inflexible "strict constructionist." In one story about them, a gentile comes to both and asks, with the obvious intention of provoking them, to be taught the whole Torah while standing on one leg. Shammai is indeed provoked and gives the man an angry whack with a measuring rod. Hillel replies,

“That which is hateful to you, do not unto another: This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary — [and now] go study.”

It is interesting to see how “the rest is commentary” has taken on an English meaning of its own that is subtly different from Hillel’s and sometimes even opposed to it. In the Aramaic of the Talmud, “The rest is commentary – go study” (ve’idakh perusha hu, zil g’mor) is a single statement whose first half cannot be separated from its second half. Calling the rest of the Torah “commentary” has nothing dismissive about it. On the contrary, Hillel is clearly saying that commentary is crucial and that ultimate wisdom lies in it. Although not doing to others what is hateful to yourself may be the Torah’s overarching message, it is not one that can be treated in isolation from the vast body of practice and learning that surrounds it.

Yet, in our current American usage, “the rest is commentary” often means “the rest is trivial,” or at least, as Jeffrey Goldberg appears to intend it, “the rest is less important.” This isn’t just a matter of the second half of Hillel’s statement being forgotten; it is also one of its being deliberately disregarded. This disregard goes all the way back to the New Testament, in which Jesus is asked to name “the greatest commandment in the law” and replies:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind’: This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

There is no “go study” here, even though Jesus surely knew what Hillel had said. For Jesus — and for Christianity — “the rest is commentary” really does mean that the rest is unimportant. Commentary — the Mishnah, the Talmud, rabbinical exegesis — is for the nitpicking Jew. Loving one’s neighbor is for the spiritual Christian.

This is not, of course, what Hillel had in mind. And yet one might ask why he, too, did not cite the verse from Leviticus “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” in his answer to his gentile questioner, though he knew it as well as Jesus did, preferring instead the more negatively phrased, “What is hateful unto yourself, do not unto your neighbor” — words that do not come from the Bible at all. What made him do this?

Here, I think, lies the true cunning of the talmudic tale. For what Hillel really is doing is, at one and the same time, tactfully rebuking Shammai while letting the gentile know that, provocateur though he is, the insult he has received is inexcusable in Jewish terms. Had Hillel said, “Love thy neighbor as thyself: This is the whole Torah,” the point would not have been made. Shammai, after all, cannot be expected to love a gentile who is making fun of him, nor can the gentile expect to be loved by him. But the gentile can expect Shammai, who would not like to be struck by a measuring rod, to know better than to strike someone else, even a mocker, and it is a mark of Hillel’s sensitivity that he addresses himself, without saying so explicitly, to this precise issue.

The story in the Talmud ends with the gentile’s converting to Judaism, which at first glance may seem strange. What, after all, has Hillel said to win him over so quickly? On second thought, however, we realize that he has said the most appropriate thing that could have been said, and that in doing so he has made the gentile feel that Judaism is a religion that can speak to his own situation.

This, too, of course, is commentary — in this case, my own — but of commentary we can never get enough. “Go study” is what Judaism is all about.

<http://forward.com/culture/14250/the-rest-of-the-rest-is-commentary-02564/>

Hillel

The preeminent sage of first century Palestine whose name is on Jewish campus organizations worldwide.

BY RABBI LOUIS JACOBS

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hillel/>

Hillel was the foremost teacher in Palestine in the first century BCE. Together with Shammai, Hillel is mentioned in the first chapter of Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot) as the last of the ‘Pairs’, the five sets of two spiritual heads in succession until the leadership of the people was in the hands of Hillel’s descendants, of the house of Rabban Gamaliel. A number of Hillel’s descendants were also named Hillel, of whom the best-known is the fourth-century Hillel to whom is attributed the fixing of the calendar.

Do Unto Others...

The problem scholars have had to face in attempting to put together a biography of Hillel is that the major sources for Hillel and his activity are the Talmud and the Midrash and a good deal of the material in these sources dates from no earlier than the time of their compilation, often centuries after Hillel. Great caution is therefore necessary when using these sources for a reconstruction of Hillel's life and work.

For instance, much has been made of the talmudic story (Shabbat 31a) in which Hillel, when asked by a prospective convert to Judaism to teach him the whole Torah while he stood on one leg, replied: "That which is hateful unto you do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole of the Torah, The rest is commentary. Go forth and study."

Theologians, Jewish and non-Jewish, have compared this version of the Golden Rule, stated in negative form, with that of Jesus, in the positive form. There is a total failure to appreciate that this story is told, in Babylonian Aramaic, at least 200 years after Hillel and probably much later. Moreover, in the same set of stories related in a Midrash, the hero is not Hillel at all but Rabbi Joshua.

Similarly, when it is said of Hillel and other key figures that they lived for 120 years, it is as obvious as can be that this is not factual but a way of saying that these teachers followed in the footsteps of Moses who was 120 years old at his death (Deuteronomy 34:7).

Yet while there is little authentic information about Hillel and Shammai themselves, the Mishnah and Talmud are full of the great debates between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai.

The Two Houses: Hillel and Shammai

That there were two houses, in the sense of schools, formed of the disciples of the two sages, is undeniable but even with regard to these houses the sources have to be approached with caution. Although, in the Talmudic sources, the House of Hillel generally gives lenient rulings in matters of law and the House of Shammai stricter rulings, it can hardly be suggested that the 300 and more cases debated by the two great schools depended solely, or even mainly, on whether the law should be decided strictly or leniently.

We are told nowhere, in fact, why two separate schools should have emerged at all, and we are largely left in ignorance both of their composition and of the principles by which they operated.

In an oft-quoted talmudic passage (Eruvin 13b), dating not earlier than the third century CE and obviously containing strong elements of pure legend, it is said that for three years the two houses debated whether the law should be decided in accordance with the House of Hillel or the House of Shammai and there was a danger that the Torah would become two Torahs; in other words, there was a danger of schism in which the religious practices and the laws of one group of Jews were quite different from those of another group of Jews.

The issue was finally decided by a Bat Kol, a voice from heaven, which declared: "Both these and these are the words of the living God but the law (the Halakhah) is in accordance with the rulings of the House of Hillel."

All this has left modern scholarship with the extremely difficult and purely conjectural task of discovering the guiding principles behind the decisions and debates between the two houses.

Some modern scholars suggest that the two houses operated by different exegetical methods, interpreting Scripture in ways that led to different practical conclusions. In one version of this theory, the House of Shammai favored a more literal meaning of Scripture, while the House of Hillel tended to interpret Scripture in a less than literal manner.

Possible Class Differences

Louis Ginzberg (1873-1953) advanced the ingenious thesis that the two houses really represented two social classes: the House of Shammai legislating for the wealthy landowners, the 'patricians', the House of Hillel for the working classes, the 'plebeians', as these are called by Ginzberg's disciple, Louis Finkelstein.

To give one example among many, the Mishnah (Gittin 9:10) states: 'The House of Shammai say: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found her to be unfaithful, for it is written (Deuteronomy 24:1), "because he has found some indecency in her." But the House of Hillel say: Even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written: "because he has found some (i.e. 'any') indecency in her."

On the theory of difference in exegetical principles, the different rulings of the two houses are based solely on how literally the verse is to be interpreted. But on the Ginzberg-Finkelstein hypothesis, the scriptural exegesis is secondary and derives from the different needs and attitudes of two different social classes. The two houses, each legislating for a

different social class, are bound to interpret Scripture in the way they do, since the position of women among the aristocracy is far better than among the lower social classes.

The trouble with all the theories, is that they can only be made to work by selective quotations and are far too neat. And what is one to make of the purely theological debates between the two houses upon which neither the exegetical nor the sociological theory has any bearing? Why, for example, did the House of Shammai say (Eruvin 13b) that it were better for a man not to have been created than to have been created and the House of Hillel say it were better for man to have been created than not to have been created, and why did the House of Hillel eventually agree with the House of Shammai on this matter?

To date, no satisfactory theory has been advanced which convincingly explains the reason or reasons for the emergence of two separate schools. It remains true that, because of the Bat Kol, Jewish law is usually decided in favor of the House of Hillel.

In the 16th-century Lurianic Kabbalah, it is stated that in this world, the law generally follows the more lenient views of the House of Hillel, but in the Messianic age, when people will have greater spiritual stamina, the law will follow the tougher rulings of the House of Shammai.

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