

**“If We Have The Answer, Have We Already
Asked The Question?”**

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury
November 1, 2015

READINGS: Psalm 146
Mark 12:28-34

I am sure many, if not all of you, can conjure up memories of a certain test or exam that you had when in school, and sweating the process and worrying about the results.

There is a trick to doing well in tests and exams. Easier said than done, but a sure way to succeed nonetheless.

What is the magical solution? Well, let me set the scene by talking about partial solutions to acing an exam. To begin, study well. Also, talk with fellow students about the course and compare notes as to what is important. Maybe even go to the teacher or professor and ask for some help in discerning the essential matters to turn one’s attention to in preparation for the final test.

All of these can work and lead to success, but there are no guarantees. You may misjudge what is important, or study the wrong material. There is one way that is a sure bet method to succeed: Guess what the questions will be on the exam, and study the answers to those questions.

Now I am not trying to conjure up worries about experiences that, for some of us, may be decades old, but I am sure you agree with my analysis – study the right questions for history or English or Science exams, and success will be yours.

In that context I am confident that Jesus had already thought through the question asked of him by the Sadducees and Pharisees at various points in his career. When confronted with the question in today’s reading: “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus did not spend a lot of time thinking about the answer, struggling for clarity and certainty. He already knew the answer because he had thought about the question. In fact, he thought about the question so much that he knew the question had its own flaws – there was not one key commandment in Jesus’ mind, but two, and so he answered accordingly. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength” and “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Jesus had the answer, because he had pondered the question.

I have decided most reality shows on television today get our attention because many of the participants take actions that seem extreme and awkward, even inappropriate. In

almost all cases, they have not asked the question that precedes any decision for success.

One good example of that is the show: "Say Yes to the Dress."

The show chronicles the journey to buy a bridal gown from a high-end bridal salon by various brides – various sizes and shapes, various ethnic backgrounds and colour, various economic classes and personal styles. The show follows the challenges of pleasing a bride and her entourage; it displays the tensions between a bride and her parents, accentuated when the latter are separated or divorced;

It points out the extravagance of some of these bridal decisions, especially when the bride's wishes are at odds with the budget provided by the parent or grandparent who is making the purchase.

Now you may wonder how I got into watching such a show, much less connecting it to the message for today – to love God and to love your neighbour.

Well, Jesus answered a question about the greatest commandment (in other words, how to live by the laws of God) with a simple answer. He did not say there are no laws to live by; he simply defined them clearly and directly.

I got watching "Say Yes to the Dress," and other equally mind-numbing shows, when I gave up baseball viewing this summer.

It started when Blue Jays first baseman Josh Donaldson was hit by a pitch up and near his head in the first inning of a game against the Kansas City Royals on August 2nd. Uncharacteristically, umpire Jim Wolf issued a warning to both benches – next person to be hit, the pitcher will be thrown out.

Now Donaldson was buzzed by a pitch later in the game, after shortstop Troy Tulowitzki also had been hit. No pitcher was thrown out on the Kansas City side.

So when in the 8th inning Aaron Sanchez hit Alcides Escobar in the shin and was thrown out, a mob scene was created. Throw at batters' heads and nothing happens; hit a guy in the shin and the pitcher is tossed. Buck Martinez, the Blue Jays television commentator, yelled at the umpire over the airwaves: "You can't do that." And I agreed. And so if umpires do not need to follow the rules they create, why should baseball players? If there are no rules that cannot be broken by umpires, then why watch the games? If we can eliminate rules of life, why bother living? And so when people started to get excited about Toronto baseball, in many cases during that very weekend of baseball, I stopped watching the team I had followed since the first pitch in the snow in April, 1977. And I must say life has been better for it.

That is when I looked for other television programs to watch, and during the recent American League playoffs I got interested in "Say Yes to the Dress."

The truth is this bridal reality show offers far more insight into an understanding of living by the rules that impact our lives than sports ever will.

Let me explain. The show teaches essential truths about life.

The first one is that unless a person is clear about what is important, finding the perfect wedding gown becomes almost impossible. We make good and effective decisions once we are clear what we value and see as important.

That parallels the story of Jesus – unless we see what is important in our lives, we cannot live effectively for we never know how to judge what is fair and just.

“Say Yes to the Dress” teaches us much more. If a bride lacks self-confidence and a sense of self-worth, often her entourage will push her this way and that, and so a decision on a dress is very hard. Unless we treat our neighbour, and family member and friend as we would want to be treated, we live in vain.

Finally, when the bride is not clear on the budget to be spent for a dress, or pushes a family member to exceed the agreed amount, then the dollars to be spent become more important than the ceremony to be celebrated. Reducing a wedding ceremony and marriage vows to the perfect dress diminishes the truth of the ceremony and the relationship to be celebrated.

We are not worrying about saying yes to any dress here at St. Andrew’s. But we are coming together in wrapping up our stewardship focus to remind ourselves what is important – to love God and to love one another; we are to be reminded that affirming the worth and value of each individual is essential to everyone’s well-being; in communion we acknowledge that being spiritually strengthened is the best way to live with confidence and hope, and we are a people who seek to accomplish much, but who do so within real and accepted budgetary guidelines.

If we ask the question: “What shall I give to support the church in 2016?” it is easy to come up with an answer if we are clear about what is important to us. It is not a dollar decision, I learned by watching “Say Yes to the Dress,” it is a decision about what is important in my life.

As Jesus said: Love God, and love one another. So I invite you to join with me and say “Yes to the church – and to God” in your plans for 2016.