Jesus said to them, “How is it then that David, by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet?’ If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’” (Matthew 22:43-44)

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew, and especially these obscure words of Jesus we hear at the end of it, reminds me of someone I knew years ago. Christine was a classmate of mine in seminary. She had a big heart and a passion for social justice and political activism. She wanted the church to take public stands, and courageously side with any group that was marginalized and without power. Public protests, civil disobedience, getting arrested for Jesus, and encouraging others to do the same were all part of how she envisioned her ministry in the church. It was an election year, and Christine made no secret of her politics; she aligned herself with the Democratic Party, and gladly spoke about her voting preferences whenever she was asked – and sometimes when she was not asked. Also she would counsel others on how they too should vote whenever she was asked – and sometimes when she was not asked. Unfortunately, Christine lost all perspective, and believed so strongly in her stances that she often talked as if the Democratic Party and the Christian faith were virtually the same thing. She could see no daylight between them.

I’ll never forget one class discussion on the role the church should play in politics. Christine obviously thought that the church’s role should be highly visible and vocal. In the course of the discussion, someone mentioned the name of Senator John Danforth of Missouri, who was simultaneously an Episcopal priest and a United States Senator. Christine’s face lit up: here was a prophetic marriage of faith and politics! But her countenance fell as quickly as it rose when she learned that Senator Danforth was, in fact, a Republican. Silence. Lines of consternation contorted Christine’s face as her mind struggled to grasp how one person could be both an Episcopal priest and a Republican senator at the same time. Here in New York City, where it’s said that politics are so blue they are indigo, some of you may share Christine’s utter dismay. You may also appreciate the conclusion she finally reached. At length she broke her long, awkward silence by declaring, “Well, he must be a heretic!”

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew is a continuation of what we’ve been hearing for the past few Sundays: the skirmishes between Jesus, and the Pharisees and Sadducees. The setting is the Jerusalem Temple, and the time is just a day or two after Palm Sunday. It was what we’ve come to call Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, Jesus had entered the city as great cheering throngs shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” They believed him to be the Messiah, but not everyone took his arrival as good news. The Pharisees and Sadducees were the Jewish religious authorities who presided over the Law of Moses and the Temple. Increasingly, they perceived the words and deeds of Jesus to be a threat to their influence. They became ever more determined to silence his voice: to discredit him, if not do away with him altogether. To this end the Pharisees and Sadducees devised a series of trick questions with which to ambush Jesus. So here come the Pharisees again today, intent on ambushing Jesus.

Fun fact for history buffs: it’s a fitting day to be talking about an ambush. Today is the 133rd anniversary of the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral. That’s right: it was on this very day in 1881 when the brothers Wyatt, Virgil, and Morgan Earp, along with Doc Holliday ambushed the brothers Ike and Billy Clanton, along with their cowboy friends Tom and Frank McLaury on the
streets of Tombstone, AZ. After thirty seconds of wild shooting, Billy Clanton and the McLaury brothers lay dead. It was ambush under the guise of respectable law keeping.

By the end of the week Jesus is going to meet a similar end, but today the weapons of ambush are words. Matthew tells us that a Pharisee came to Jesus with a question to test him. Some translations use the word trap instead of test. The Pharisee’s question was simply this: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus responded with words we know well – words we’ve come to call “the summary of the law:” You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. What was original to Jesus was not the two commandments themselves, but the linking of the two of them. The second commandment is not of secondary importance, but of equal prominence. Love God and love your neighbor: these twin poles support all the law and the prophets. Jesus’ response was entirely traditional, yet refreshingly novel at the same time. No one could argue with it.

Having survived yet another ambush of the Pharisees, Jesus then decided to set a snare of his own. He asked them: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” The Pharisees could see the trap in front of them, but they could do nothing to avoid stepping right into it. You see, everyone listening in knew full well that the Messiah was to be a descendent of David. What is more, the Pharisees were entirely aware that the Palm Sunday crowds had welcomed Jesus with the words Hosanna to the Son of David. By giving the only answer they could – that the Messiah was David’s son – the Pharisees would be evidently agreeing with the crowds that Jesus was the Messiah, not publicly discrediting him as they had sought to do.

But Jesus had more in mind than merely tripping up the Pharisees. He wanted to use the opportunity to teach about the nature of the Messiah. He pressed on with a question about one of the Psalms of David: “How is it then that David, by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet?”’ If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” Essentially, what Jesus was asking them was: How can the Messiah be both David’s son and David’s Lord? How can one person be two opposing things at once? How can one person be both subordinate and superior at the same time? It was a question not unlike the one that befuddled Christine. Silence was the result. We can almost see the lines of consternation contorting the Pharisees’ faces. They will not speak to Jesus again until they have ambushed him in the Garden of Gethsemane, and have him on trial before Caiaphas, the high priest. There they declare him a heretic, and a blasphemer who deserved death.

What did Jesus mean by his question about the Messiah’s being the son of David? It seems to me that Jesus thought the Pharisees and the crowds themselves were stuck in a rut concerning the nature of the Messiah, and he wanted to shake them out of it. They needed a new paradigm for who the Messiah would and could be. They needed a new model to guide their expectations. The prophets had foretold the coming of the Messiah: that figure whom God would send to vindicate the Jews and put their enemies under their feet. They were told the Messiah was to be an heir of David, so they figured he would be a king on the order of David, with a mighty military to accomplish his divine purposes. So whenever they talked about the Messiah in terms of his being David’s son, they would soon be stuck in the rut of believing that the Messiah could only be a powerful king and warrior. What Jesus was trying to accomplish with his unanswerable question was to show that the “son of David” metaphor was inadequate to describe the Messiah. For one thing, it didn’t really square with his new summary of the law. Love God, love your neighbor, and sit back now to enjoy the Messiah ambush and kill your enemies? No! It was time to get unstuck from the nationalistic, militaristic rut. It was time for a new way to think about the Messiah, because the Messiah was now in their midst.

How did Jesus want people to think about the Messiah? How did he want them to think about him? Ultimately, the way of being the Messiah that Jesus was acting out would challenge
people to believe that one person could be two seemingly opposing things at once. The Messiah would not be a warrior and king. The Messiah would suffer and die. “God forbid, Lord, this shall not happen to you!” declared Peter. Heresy, blasphemy, away with him, crucify him would shout the crowds. But Jesus was obedient to his calling, even to death on a cross. His kingdom would be established not through military might, not through politics red or blue, but through sacrificial love. The enemies to be defeated were not the other nations, but sin itself. And the last enemy to be defeated would be death. How was Jesus the Christ, the Messiah going to do it? He had already told them: by going to Jerusalem and suffering many things from the elders and chief priest and scribes, by being killed, and on the third day being raised. To be a Christian is to accept Jesus’ version of the Messiah, and to follow in his footsteps, even denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, and coming after him. It required then, and it requires today, what might be a complete overhaul of your world view.

Some time ago I heard a fable that I’ve since learned comes from the Hindu tradition. The story is about a frog who lived by the sea, and enjoyed the warmth of the sun, the vast expanse of water, and all the riches of the outdoors. Nearby was a deep, dark well, and at the bottom of the well was a kingdom of frogs who had been born there, and had never known anything else. They were fat and happy, and lived off the abundant worms they could find. One day the sea-frog came upon the well, and he called down to the well-frogs, asking if he might come for a visit. They agreed, and welcomed their guest from another world. They listened intently about the kingdom above that the sea-frog described. “Is it as big as this well,” they asked? “No,” said the sea-frog. It is like nothing you can imagine. You cannot imagine the beauty of the sea unless you come out of this well.”

It’s here that the fable veers off into a number of different endings that I’ve heard over the years. The most common ending is that the well-frogs become angry at the sea-frog, accusing him of lying, and belittling their domain with his delusions of grandeur. So they kick him out of their well and order him never to return. In a sharper ending along the same line, it’s the king of the well-frogs who realizes that the very existence of the sea frog, and his descriptions of a beautiful other world, threaten not only his crown, but the only life he’s ever known. No one must ever speak of these things again! Therefore the king conspires with others to arrest the sea-frog and put him to death. Sound familiar?

Still other endings to the fable describe how the sea-frog invited any who would follow him on a journey to his native habitat. The only stipulation was that they would have to leave the well. They would have leave behind everything they believed was true about their existence. So the journey began to the top of the well, and when they finally arrived they hopped over a dune and saw for the first time the unimaginable sparkling sea. Some of the well-frogs could not process what they were seeing. It was too bright, too vivid, too big for them to comprehend. It could not be true. They simply couldn’t take it all in, and fearing that they would go mad, they scurried back to the well as fast as they could, and dove to the bottom where they would be safe, where they would never again speak of the sea. But the vision would haunt their dreams. Others beheld the sea and knew that they could never again return to the narrow confines of their deep, dark little well.

I rather like that the fable has taken on multiple endings because it allows us to choose which it will be for us. Jesus came to show us the sea – the sea called the kingdom of heaven – and he bids us to follow him there. The way is love. Love is the key. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.