10/23/11 is Pentecost 19A
Law and Gospel

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 or Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17 or Psalm 1
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46

Luther says this text holds two questions that every Christian must understand. The first is about the law: "What is the greatest commandment?" The second is about the gospel: "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Luther elaborates upon all this in his sermon for the 18th Sunday after Trinity (our 19th after Pentecost) from his Church Postil.
(http://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity18/LutherGospel.html)

He then spends the majority of the rest of the sermon talking about the first question. His point seems to be that love is the fulfillment of the law. It is the purpose of the law. The point of the law is to love God and love neighbor. If the law draws you away from this, you've missed the point. Luther says, "We find even today many monks or priests who rather let a poor man freeze, than violate their statutes and ordinances."

John says we miss the point if we don't love too: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love." (1 John 4:7-8)

Paul makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 13. If I speak eloquently, have all wisdom and knowledge, have enough faith to move mountains, and even am willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice, but don't have love, I have missed the point.

Paul makes the point in Galatians: "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:14)

Paul makes the point again in Romans: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' 10Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

Luther even asks the question, why do we even need the law in the first place, if the whole point is love? He concludes that we need the law to show us how far we've missed the mark of love.

There is a beauty and simplicity in his logic. He makes the point well, and only gets to the second question in the last few paragraphs. I must admit, this one has stumped me as well.

Augustine (http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.vii.xliv.html) says this puzzle is something that Christians "ought to solve." Augustine points out that Jesus didn't bother to solve the enigma either. Here it is: the messiah is the son of David, but in Psalm 110:1, David seems to be saying the messiah is David's Lord. How can the Messiah be both David's son and David's Lord.

Augustine (http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.vii.xliii.html), Chrysostom (http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.iii.LXVIII.html) and other patristics use this passage to point to both the humanity and divinity of Christ. He is son of David (ancestor of David) in the flesh of his humanity, but in his divinity he is David's Lord.

"The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand," was interpreted by early Christians to be God saying to Jesus, "Come, and sit at my right hand." The Jewish interpretation would be that of a royal psalm. God is saying to my king, sit at my right hand, on this throne, that is really My Throne. Kings served by divine right. And then I'll help you defeat your enemies (the kings of the surrounding nations). Some Jewish interpretations see this as Abraham, because of the connection with Melchizedek (verse 4). The Messiah is Judah's warrior-king.

The rest of the psalm gives a foreboding picture of this messianic vision: "He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter heads over the wide earth." (110:6) One writer I read called this God of genocide, who pops up from time to time in the Hebrew Bible. This God is hard to reconcile with Jesus, who taught his disciples to pray to God as Our Father," a loving "abba" daddy, who desperately loves his children, has the hairs on their head numbered and welcomes them home like a prodigal parent.

Some writers point out that the Scribes' "son of David" imagery was precisely a warlord kind of imagery that Jesus wished to challenge. This messiah would be a conquering image of David, coming to kill his tens of thousands, and reestablish Israel as a world power. These writers point out that Jesus is negating this conquering messiah for a different vision. Far from just son of David, this messiah is Son of God, whom David will call Lord. The Christian reinterpretation moves messiah from conquering warrior-king to Lord of Love, which was the point of the first part of this passage.

All of this is probably too much of a quagmire for a clear preaching message, but it serves the preacher well to scratch the surface of the many subthemes of these texts. In the end, Luther had it right. Preach Jesus' vision of love as the center of the law. Convey a sense that the two questions in this text are central: What is the law, and who is this Messiah Jesus?