

Scripture Lesson: Mark 12:28-34

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 46

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³ and 'to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that, no one dared to ask him any question.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

Mark 12:28-34

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"The First Commandment

Pastor Amy Terhune

"A little boy about 7 or 8 years old was in church one Sunday morning with his grandmother. Everything was going along fine until it was time for the offering. The grandmother began to frantically search through her purse, but she couldn't find her offering envelope. Apparently, she had left it at home. It was a most embarrassing moment for her as she kept looking through her purse for something she could put in the collection plate.

"Her grandson sensed her dilemma and offered a solution. "Here, Gramma," he told her, "You take my dollar and put it in, and I'll hide under the seat!" [from James W. Moore, *Yes, Lord I Have Sinned* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 34.]

Children learn from watching adults. That is how they determine what is important in life. Wayne Barrett is a nationally recognized leader in the field of Christian stewardship. He has authored several books, and he ran the Methodist Foundation here in Michigan for years. He says that the first time he ever saw a fifty-dollar bill was in a church offering plate. And this was years ago, when fifty dollars was worth a lot more than it is today. Seeing that fifty-dollar bill in the offering plate spoke louder to him than any words. In the days before church envelopes and online giving, he saw firsthand how important the church was to his parents and the other adults in their congregation by the gifts they gave. It wasn't that these folks were necessarily wealthy, at least, by American standards. But they were committed. Seeing fifty- and twenty- and ten-dollar bills in the offering plate taught young Wayne Barrett a lesson he would remember the rest of his life: the work of the church is important. [3¶s from "Like Parent, Like Child" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

There are some who question that in today's world. But the work of the church happens on God's time, so it moves in inches rather than miles. It's easy to discount the work of the church...until it's gone, and there's no one to give the guy down the street gas money, or spend time with the shut-in, or provide a gathering place for people to connect, or offer free counseling to the grieving widow, or make sure the kids have someone who tells them every week that they're loved. The work of the church is love and compassion.

Recently, a colleague drew my attention to a new book on the shelves by Allie Beth Stuckey entitled “Toxic Empathy”. Now toxic empathy is a real thing in psychological circles. It’s traditionally understood as what happens to a caregiver who is unable to maintain healthy boundaries to such a degree that they become part of the problem instead of part of a solution. Caregivers, including clergy, who have a “fix it” mentality are susceptible to toxic empathy. We get entangled and can’t separate our feelings from another’s. Unfortunately, we can’t truly help people if we don’t maintain healthy boundaries.

But that’s not what Stuckey is writing about. No. In “Toxic Empathy” Allie Beth Stuckey argues that empathy has become a tool of manipulation by left-wing activists who bully people into believing that they must adopt progressive positions to be loving. For her, truth outranks love. Truth and love become competitors rather than companions. But love is bigger than politics and there are plenty of people from different perspectives who live truly loving lives. Knowing that someday I have to answer to God for my life, I have chosen to err on the side of love; of empathy; of letting others touch my heart. Sometimes, I get it wrong, but I’d rather answer to God for that than for a hard heart. Love is how I grow. And I think love is going to be how we move forward – when we learn to hear truth in stories from different perspectives and find the common ground that enables us to care about and for each other.

Jesus regularly engaged empathy. In fact, empathy for humankind is the reason he came among us in the first place. He never chose between truth and love. He knew they went together, and he lived that faithfully. As our lesson opens, a public debate is underway between Jesus and the religious authorities. First the Pharisees challenge Jesus about whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and unto God what is God’s,” says Jesus. Good answer. We heard about that last week. Then the Sadducees pose a hypothetical situation about a woman who is widowed and remarried seven times. In the resurrection, they want to know which of the seven dead men will be her husband. To which Jesus responds, “you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God,” and he precedes to explain it to them. Neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees believe they have anything to learn from an itinerate preacher-man from Nazareth. His words cannot penetrate their thinking because he doesn’t come from the right city, or the right family, or the right class. They see a threat rather than a blessing, a problem instead of a gift, a rabble-rouser instead of a God-send. They don’t engage him to learn or grow. They engage him to trip him up—to catch him saying something they can use against him.

But listening to all of this is this scribe. He hears the questions. He hears Jesus’ responses. And he is intrigued. Unlike the others, he comes to Jesus with obvious sincerity. This isn’t an effort to trip him up or corner him. The scribe realizes Jesus is a learned individual, so he poses a genuine question—one meant to spark a meaningful conversation. Now remember, the scribes are the legal experts of that day. There are 613 laws in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, and this scribe would have known every last one of them backwards and forwards. Which commandment is the first of all? Which is the most important? Which one outranks the others? Jesus’ answer is one every bystander listening in would have immediately recognized. It’s Deuteronomy 6:4-5: *Shema y’Israel, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai ehod...* “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

“This is the basic creed of the Jewish people. It’s called “the Shema”, from the first word in the phrase ‘to hear’. It is the first scripture that every Jewish child commits to memory. For thousands of years now, it has been the first sentence with which a service of worship begins in a Jewish synagogue. It is the phrase which the devout Jew wore on a leather bracelet when he went to prayers. When Jesus

quoted this phrase as the greatest commandment, the Jews were nodding their heads in agreement. They knew these words meant that we must give ourselves totally to God... “

“But then Jesus goes and does something rather unusual. “The second is this,” he says. “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” That’s also from the Hebrew Bible, from Leviticus 19:18. The linking of the two is extremely familiar to us. We call the pair of them ‘The Great Commandment’. But the listener in Jesus’ day would not have put the two together. The link between the two is the word love. But it’s deeper than that. In linking the two Jesus is saying that loving God involves loving neighbor. And not just their upright neighbors, their wealthy neighbors, the neighbors just like they are. It also means the leper begging at the gate, the orphan in the street, the widow going hungry in her home. “A neighbor is anyone who has a need to which you or I have the capacity to respond.” [2¶s from “Religion In A Nutshell” by Robert L. Allen, www.Sermons.com.]

A woman sent a letter to Ann Landers a few years back to tell her about someone who took the time to respond with loving kindness.

"Dear Ann Landers, I am a 46-year-old woman, divorced, with 3 grown children. After several months of chemotherapy following a mastectomy for breast cancer, I was starting to put my life back together when my doctor called with the results of my last checkup. They had found more cancer, and I was devastated.

"My relatives had not been supportive, and I felt hurt and alone as I was facing yet more uncertainty.

"Last Saturday I headed for the Laundromat. You see the same people there almost every week. We exchange greetings, and make small talk. So I pulled into the parking lot, determined not to look depressed, but my spirits were really low. "While taking my laundry out of the car, I looked up and saw a man, one of the regulars, leaving with his bundle. He smiled and said, 'Good morning. How are you today?' Suddenly I lost control of myself and blurted out, 'This is the worst day of my life! I have more cancer!' Then I began to cry.

"He put his arms around me and just let me sob. Then he said, 'I understand. My wife has been through it, too.' After a few minutes I felt better, stammered out my thanks, and proceeded on with my laundry.

"About 15 minutes later, here he came back with his wife. Without saying a word, she walked over and hugged me. Then she said, 'I've been there, too. Feel free to talk to me. I know what you're going through.' And we talked a long time.

Ann, I can't tell you how much that meant to me. Here was this total stranger, taking her time to give me emotional support and courage to face the future at a time when I was ready to give up. Oh, I hope God gives me a chance to do for someone else what that wonderful woman and her husband did for me. Meanwhile, Ann, please let your readers know that even though there are a lot of hardhearted people in this world, there are some incredibly generous and loving ones, too." [6 ¶s contributed by Dr. John Bardsley; as used in “And the Word Is...Love” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Empathy made all the difference, and these are the stories that give us hope, don't they? Hope for humanity and for the future. They inspire us to want to live out love for others. But the truth of the matter is: it's not always so easy to love others. Loving one's neighbor isn't painless or effortless. Because neighbors aren't always loveable, are they? Sometimes they're thankless, complaining, never satisfied, ornery and ungracious. Sometimes they don't even know they're beneficiaries of good grace. But Jesus gives us a clue. We don't love others because it is deserved. We love because we are loved.

To love God and neighbor is the most basic choice before us. It is the ultimate embodiment of what it means to be a person of faith. "In seeking to test his middle school students one day, a rabbi asked them, "Which act of charity is higher—giving out of obligation or giving from the heart?"

"All in the class were inclined to respond that giving from the heart had something more in it."

"And the rabbi agreed. "Giving from the heart is a wonderful thing," the rabbi said, "It is a very high act and should never be demeaned. But there is something much more important that happens when somebody gives charity out of obligation. Consider who is doing the giving. When somebody gives from the heart, there is a clear sense of oneself doing something; in other words, heartfelt charity always involves at least a little bit of ego gratification.

"However, when we give out of obligation, we give at a moment that every part of us is yelling NO! because of one reason or another—perhaps the beneficiary is disgusting, or it is too much money, or any of thousands of reasons we use to avoid giving charity. Then we are confronting our own egos, and giving nonetheless. Why? Because we are supposed to. Because we have committed to living a certain way, by certain values. And what this means is that it is not us doing the giving, rather we have turned ourselves over to God to become the vehicle through which God gives...[4¶s from David A. Cooper, *Entering the Sacred Mountain: A Mystical Odyssey* (Bell Tower, 1994); as used in "No Holding Back" by David E. Leininger, www.Sermons.com.]

I find that to be a fascinating theory. To give, to love, to share with others means we put God first, even when everything rational tells us to take care of #1. Or maybe a better way to put it is like this: when we truly love God and others, what we rank as #1 shifts. I'm not #1. There is something greater than my needs, my wants, my individual priorities. And I find fullest expression of my own heart, life, mind, and strength when I participate in that which is beyond little me. Every day, a thousand choices confront us. Sometimes, we choose wisely. Sometimes we choose poorly. Amazing grace fills the gap.

Throughout this sermon series, I've been using the word FIRST in each sermon title. Two weeks ago it was: The last shall be FIRST. Last week, FIRST fruits. This Week, the FIRST commandment. Next week, just as preview: Putting Saginaw FIRST. This is my very sly and underhanded way of making us think about our name. Most churches get named FIRST because they're the first Methodists in a town. No offense, but that's a dumb thing to name a church. To be fair, every church I've served under appointment in Michigan has been a First, so I've had decades to think about this. But what if we were "The Last Shall Be First Church"? What if we were "First Fruits Church". What if we "The First Commandment Church?" What if Saginaw First United Methodist Church put God First but putting Saginaw First? You see where I'm going, I hope? What if our name reflected our commitment to not be First, but to put God First – to love God and neighbor?

And that's what Jesus wants to communicate here. He's not giving us rules. He's giving us vision for the world as it could be. It's a call to live into a new reality, a new vision for the world. And we are stewards of that vision. We don't always choose wisely. We're broken and imperfect. But the vision is not. I'm asking you to be part of God's work. I'm asking you to take on the burden of loving others, loving this whole city. I'm asking you to give gratefully, humbly, boldly, as an expression of faith. I'm asking you to give even when everything inside of you is saying no – when your mind can think of a hundred excuses not to give. I'm asking you to give because you want to be part of what God is doing – in this church, in this city, in we ourselves. Jesus is working within us. Jesus is moving among us. Jesus is calling us to put God First. And Jesus is leading us to love the whole city and love the city whole. Please be in prayer this week about how God is working in you, and bring your pledge card. I hope you are as excited as I am to see what God is going to do with us next. Thanks be to God! Amen.