

Mark 12:28-34
Pentecost 23
St Mark – October 31, 2021
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The Greatest Commandment

Our gospel reading is about love and it is also about our differences. It's about our unity and also the divisions that can lead to hatred.

Love. We are told that first we are to love the Lord our God with all that we are and second, to love our neighbor as we love our self.

The word translated as "love" in this passage is described as an active word. Not, how do we feel love, but what we do that shows our love. When Jesus tells us to "Love God" and to "Love our neighbor as we love ourselves", it seems that he is telling us to take action.

Not long after what takes place in our reading this morning, Jesus institutes The Lord's Supper with his Apostles. He washes their feet, he foretells his betrayal, and then commands them to love. John quotes Jesus as saying,

"... I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

This "new commandment" sounds a lot like what Jesus said to our questioning scribe in this morning's reading.

We are told to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. An easy concept at first blush, but it turns out to be a bit more complicated than we might think.

Carrying through on the idea of showing love, how do I, how do you, how do each of us love ourselves? Not how do we indulge ourselves, but rather how do we love the soul, the body, and the God-given self we are to love? We can't love our neighbor as we love ourselves until we answer that question.

There is another idea that bubbles up in today's gospel lesson and that is division, division that flies in the face of God's call for unity.

This story of putting the question to Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" is told in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, called synoptic because all three tell similar stories from a similar perspective.

Mark tells the story in a way that makes the scribe sound sympathetic, almost as a follower or at least a fan of Jesus. In Matthew's gospel it is a lawyer who asks the question and it says that he asked the question to test Jesus. Luke also uses a lawyer to test Jesus, but his question is, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

In these gospels the core of Jesus' answer is the same, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Mark uses this opportunity to make clear that what Jesus is telling them comes directly from the scriptures they know so well, what we call the Old Testament, and then he adds a bit more.

In the passage from Deuteronomy this morning we read, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is 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 might."

Almost exactly the same words Jesus used to answer the scribe.

Mark sets the scene telling us that there were Saducees disputing with one another. Saducees were just one of the more than 10 distinct groups that had evolved within Judaism by the time Jesus walked the earth. These groups disagreed on points of theology and were sometimes openly critical of other Jewish groups, behaving much like some of our fellow Christians do today. But, throughout the Bible we hear God speak of unity.

If we were to quote the passages where Jesus calls us to be unified, we'd be here all morning and if we added the passages from the Old Testament calling for the same thing, we'd be here all day.

Unity doesn't mean uniformity. It is our differences and open discussion of those differences that brings about a better understanding of God and each other. As Saint Francis prayed, may I strive more to understand than to be understood. The unity we are called to requires that we strive for this... if we are to live into the commandment Jesus proclaimed to be the greatest of all.

We are not meant to be all the same. We are called to cherish and learn from our God-given differences. It is when our differences become divisions that the trouble starts.

We have endless examples of our differences and we have endless examples of our differences turning into division with labels that carry expectations both good and bad. Sadly, our differences can become hatreds. I'm not speaking of the different likes and dislikes we have, but rather the more important formative views we hold. Formative in that they shape us, they influence how we view the world.

There is great danger in believing we are capable of making decisions for God and there is endless power in embracing the greatest commandment.

I believe that our differences are God-given. The differences in the way we look, of course, but also and more importantly in the way we think. Our differences enrich the Body of Christ. These differences enrich the whole world. It is when

differences turn away from discussion and become arguments that Satan makes his move.

The little crack that first shows itself as impatience, just before we get down to the arguing, is all that Satan needs to turn our anger into hatred. That little crack is all the crafty Devil needs to take the good God gave us and turn it deadly, deadly in this life and beyond.

Early in the 1500's the seeds of The Reformation began to take shape across Europe. The Church of Rome had established itself as a powerful and highly structured organization. Much good had been done by the Church of Rome over the centuries and corruption had taken hold as well. A clash surrounding who's in charge, the King or the Pope, was just one of the many questions to be answered.

When Henry VIII declared himself to be Supreme Head of the Church of England in 1535 he solved two problems. He put to rest his power struggle with the Pope who was the head of the Church of Rome and he also made it possible for himself to divorce and re-marry in the hope of producing a male heir to his throne while remaining in good standing with The Church of England.

Henry's actions coupled with The Reformation sent England into a period of unrest and violent persecution for decades to come. The differences that started all of this were complex and challenged what had become deeply held beliefs. Like so many human differences, a 'we versus them' situation developed. Name calling ensued and 'True Believers' railed against 'Heretics' in what both sides viewed as their defense of God. It depended on who was doing the name-calling as to which group, followers of The Church of England or followers of The Church of Rome, was labeled 'Believers' or 'Heretics'.

Had the people of England held fast to Jesus' words, "Love God with all that you are", "Love yourself and your neighbor", they might very well have been able to force Satan out of their disagreement. They might have been guided by the Holy Spirit into a greater understand of God.

Leaving the work of God to God isn't always easy. Not all Christians believe that we can be unified, but I believe that we must be. How can we dare to call ourselves Christians if we are unable to look past our disagreements and our prejudices to see Jesus in the faces of our brothers and sisters in Christ and all of our neighbors?

John quotes Jesus talking to his Father and saying, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

Later in the chapter Jesus is quoted further when he says:

“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

We can quickly move from the most Holy words of Jesus to the darkest side of our life on earth. Divide and conquer takes on a nasty and terrifying connotation when we consider the power it holds for Satan.

So let us dwell on Jesus and hold fast to his love. May we live in love for one another as God loves us. May we see each person not by worldly labels, but as a child of God just as we are each God’s child. May our differences be opportunities to learn, to learn about each other, to learn about God.

Father, free us from every prejudice and fear that we may recognize evil and reject it even as we search for the face of our precious Lord Jesus in ourselves and in our neighbors. Amen.