

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

(10/23/11)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 12:18-34

“Jesus answered, ‘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.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31)

The setting for Jesus’ encounter with the scribe is the city of Jerusalem. Jesus has entered the city only a few days earlier. His entry is nothing short of spectacular. He alone knows he is entering Jerusalem for the last time. The crowds come out to welcome him, strewing his path with palm branches. He is greeted as a conquering hero, as one whom the people both want and expect to function as a religious-military leader after the model of King David, Jesus’ heralded ancestor.

As Jesus teaches in the marketplace, the religious authorities try to discredit him. The Pharisees try to trap him with a question about paying taxes. They ask him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. If Jesus says “yes”, he will alienate the Pharisees and those Jews who object to the Roman occupation. If he says “no”, the Herodians will report him to the Roman authorities and he will be imprisoned or executed for advocating resistance to Roman rule. Jesus’ answer silences both parties. He tells them to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s. He implicitly challenges them and us to discern the difference.

Earlier in the week, the chief priests and the elders of the people ask Jesus to declare by what authority he teaches. If Jesus says he teaches under divine authority, the Jews can accuse him of blasphemy. If he says that he teaches out of his own authority as a human being, he discredits his message. Jesus turns the table on his adversaries by asking them under what authority John baptized. If they say that it was of God, Jesus will ask them why they did not follow John. If they say it was not of God, the people will turn against them, for John had a strong following.

The third test the religious authorities put to Jesus is a question about the resurrection. The Pharisees believe in a resurrection after death; the Sadducees do not. The Sadducees pose a hypothetical situation where a woman becomes a widow. According to the laws of Moses, the widow is required to marry her husband's brother. In the hypothetical, each succeeding brother whom she marries dies prematurely. This might make me wonder about the woman, why she seems to be going through so many husbands, but this is not the Sadducees' point. They want Jesus to tell them who, in the next life, will be the woman's spouse.

Jesus tells them that they do not know what they are talking about. He tells them that in the resurrection people are not married in human form but are like angels in heaven. He then tells them that God is not the God of the dead but of the living.

In today's gospel reading, the test continues. A scribe challenges Jesus by asking him to state what he believes to be the first and greatest commandment. The crowds who await Jesus' answer know quite a bit about the law. They know the Ten Commandments that were given by God to Moses. They know the 613 other laws that faithful Jews are expected to know and follow. These are moral-ethical laws, laws concerning ritual, dietary laws, and laws regulating conduct on the Sabbath. All are equally binding upon an observant Jew.

The confrontational style of these dialogues sounds a little like our presidential debates. Representatives of various groups within Israel pose questions to Jesus. They want to find out where he stands on the issues. Whereas we might question a presidential candidate about the war in Afghanistan, the economy, universal health care, unemployment, immigration, and the role of government, the religious leaders of Jesus' day wanted to know where he stood on the matter of his authority, the Law, Israel's relationship to Rome, and his beliefs about the resurrection.

There is, however, a difference. The religious leaders are not just asking Jesus what he believes or where he stands on certain issues. They want to trap him, discredit

him, trick him into shooting himself in the foot. They want to get him into trouble with either the Jewish people or the Roman authorities. Their questioning is antagonistic.

This is where they make their biggest mistake. They are not listening to Jesus. They are not open to what he is trying to say. They are not receptive to his teaching. They already have their minds made up. Consequently, they not only fail to trap him, they fail to grasp the most important message in the history of western civilization.

The attitude we bring to Jesus' teaching is a determinative factor in what we hear, in what we learn. Some people are more interesting in counter-arguing than in being open and receptive. If you want to argue against the reality of the spiritual dimension of life, go ahead. If you want to raise all kinds of objections against the reality of God, be my guest. You can pick holes in every religious teaching, every dogma and doctrine. But what do you go away with at the end? You go away with nothing but what you brought to the dialogue. You go away empty.

It is the same when it comes to the church. If you are looking for something to criticize in this church, you will find it. This church is made up of human beings. We don't always do everything perfectly. At times, we actually make mistakes. But we always do the best we can. If you approach this church or worship with a negative attitude, you will see nothing but negative. If this happens, you will go away empty.

The Parable of the Sower and the Seed, which Jesus has just shared with the crowds, addresses our ability to receive the Word of God into our lives. The Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and lawyers who question Jesus are like the stony ground. Because of their hardness of heart, they are not open to receive a new and different teaching; the seed cannot penetrate to their soul. It cannot take root in the hearer's life.

This gospel reading tells us not to be like those who are ultimately concerned with preserving the *status quo*, with clinging to their religious beliefs, with not allowing their religious views to be challenged. It challenges us to open our minds to the teachings of Jesus. It challenges us to open our hearts to the presence of Jesus, to the

indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. If we can do this, we will experience an inner transformation. If we cannot or will not, we will go away empty.

When the scribe asks Jesus to identify the first and greatest commandment, Jesus does not turn the question back on him as he did with the other questioners. He answers without hesitation. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength." Jesus' listeners knew this teaching, for it is a passage of scripture. It is known as the Shema and it is found in Deuteronomy 6:5. The Jews knew the importance of this teaching. They wore a written copy of it attached to their arm and to their forehead. It was fastened next to their front door.

How could any religious law be more important than this? We need to love God above everything and everyone else. If we love anyone or anything more than God, that person or thing becomes an idol. If the central dynamic of our life is our love of God, then everything else will fall into its proper perspective. This includes all our fears and anxieties. They will melt away in the light of this great love.

If we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, our life will be lived out of that love. Only a beautiful, a loving, a compassionate, a charitable life of service could flow from such a love. As St. Augustine once said, "Love God and do whatever you want." This is a pretty safe thing to say. If we love God, we will only want to do kind and loving things.

But Jesus goes a step further. Without being asked, he tells the scribe what he considers to be the second greatest commandment. This commandment is found in Leviticus 19:18b: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Our love of others, the love we feel toward others, the love we show to others should flow from our love of God. It should flow from the realization that our brother or sister, even if he or she is different from us, is also from God, *is also God*. To love God is to love yourself, for you are of God. To love God is to love your neighbor, for he/she is of God. This teaching is an affirmation of the great unity of all life -- past, present,

and future. It calls us to transcend the boundaries that separate and divide us. It even enables us to be with our loved ones even who are on the other side of the grave.

Jesus tells us that the cornerstone of our religion is not the moral law but the law of love. It is the commandment to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love ourself. When we do this, we dwell within the heart of God. When we dwell within the heart of God, we are in the kingdom or realm of God; we experience eternal life. In the collection of writings known as *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese mystic, expresses this teaching about love when he says:

When you love you should not say, "God is in my heart," but rather, "I am in the heart of God."

The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich said, "Christ frees us from religion." If by religion we mean the Law, the many rules and regulations that have been given to us by God and by common sense to help us live a moral life in community, then we can see how Christ frees us from religion. Jesus came not to give us religion or perhaps even to create a religion, but to help us enter into the heart of God. When we do this, when we enter into the heart of God, when we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we will not need rules and regulations to tell us how to live. As a natural outgrowth of this love of God, we will love our neighbor as we love ourself. We will love all our neighbors as ourself. We will love all of life, all sentient beings, as ourself.

As I mentioned in my sermon last week, when we sin, it is not that we are breaking a law. Both the Greek and the Hebrew word for sin means "missing the mark." Sin is evidence that we are not living the life we are called to live. It is a sign that we have gone off track. It is a sign that we are not dwelling within the heart of God, not dwelling in the kingdom of God.

Every sin has its own built-in consequences, its own built-in punishment. It has its own karma, its own effects. The grace that is promised to us by the Gospel is the realization that at any moment we can return to God, to our true home, just as the

Prodigal Son came to his senses and returned to his home. When we turn again to God, we will experience reconciliation and the restoration of a relationship with God, with those whom we have hurt by our selfish, egocentric actions, and also with the deepest part of ourselves.

We may think that someone or something is unlovable because of some flaw or annoying habit or hurtful action. But who is really unlovable? If God loves us, if God sees us in our depths and loves us, ought we not to do the same for each other? Ought we not to do the same for our church? As Rabbi Julius Gordon has said, "Love is not blind; it sees more, not less. But because it sees more, it is willing to see less."

The scribe, to his credit, drops his antagonistic attitude and opens his heart to Jesus. He says,

You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; 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."

Scripture tells us that Jesus, moved by the scribe's receptiveness and by the wisdom of his answer, tells him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

In this response, Jesus implies that this is all we need to do to enter the kingdom of God, to enter into heaven, into the realm of eternity. It is so incredibly simple, yet it is also so incredibly difficult. It is a teaching that challenges us. It is a commandment that puts our hearts to the test. He tells us all we need to do is love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

If we do this, we will dwell in the kingdom of God. We will truly live.

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