

November 1, 2020

*"The Greatest Commandment"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 12:28-34

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There's an ancient story in the Jewish tradition about God appearing to Moses and telling Moses that he had lived for 120 years and it was now his time to die. In his best 'bargaining-with-God' attempt, Moses tries to get God to change his mind. But God claims he is powerless in this. He tells Moses, "Everything that is born must die. I cannot change this." Yet, Moses tries his best to make it otherwise. He tries to persuade God by offering some animal sacrifices instead, but God is unmoved. So then Moses turns his attention to the mountains and the stars and pleads with them to intervene with God. Even they admit that they too, in time, will pass away. Finally, God, seeing that Moses is reluctant to give up his soul, asks one of his angels to go fetch Moses. But Moses thwarts the angel's attempts through his own greater holiness. God finally then decides that he himself must claim the soul of Moses. God goes to the top of the mountain where Moses is waiting. And God leans over him and with a kiss takes his soul. Moses dies. And in the marvelous surprise ending, God then sits in the heavens and begins to cry. "Who now will love me on the earth the way Moses loved me? Who now will love my people on the earth the way Moses did?" All the angels, all the saints, gathered around God, but they could not console him. Why? Because the loss of every person from the earth who loves what the Lord loves... who loves what the Lord loves... leaves God grieving.

Today is All Saints Sunday. Throughout Christendom the names of church members who have left the earth this year are called out and remembered. We honor those who have come before us and whose faith and service live on here and in our hearts, whose memories light our path, and whose tasks and responsibilities have now fallen into our hands. So let's take another moment and think again of those saints of John Wesley. And, as well, take this time to think of those other loved ones in your life, a parent, a family member, a teacher, or a friend; someone who has shaped or molded your faith and your character and has shown you unconditional love. (Long pause)

Those are, indeed, special thoughts. Yet, they also serve to remind us just how short and fragile this mortal life is. King David acknowledges this in Psalm 39, "How fleeting my life is. You have made my days no longer than the width of my hand; my lifetime is as nothing before you. What do I wait for O Lord? Yet, my hope is in you. Deliver me from all my transgressions." You see, when we consider the brevity of our life, we are apt to question our life's meaning and purpose, on where we may have

fallen short, and on our hope for salvation at the end of this life. And we look for answers. We want to know what is the most essential thing we should be doing in this life to assure us we're on the right path. Well, I have good news for you, you don't have to speculate on that question, because today's scripture lesson tells us what is most essential. Our Lord Jesus Christ gave us the answer, word for word.

Now first, let me set the scene. Jesus is in Jerusalem. It's the final week of his ministry, just a few days before he is going to the cross. He's in the Temple, where he's fielding a series of hostile questions posed by the Pharisees who are trying to trip him up. They ask him about where his authority comes from. They ask him about paying taxes to the Roman government. They ask him about resurrection. They're hoping he says something inflammatory to incite the crowds or to commit heresy. Yet, Jesus speaks with such divine knowledge and wisdom that they couldn't find fault with anything he said. So, an unnamed scribe, after hearing Jesus' reasoning and observing that he answered all the questions with just such a divine wisdom, comes forward with a final question. "Which commandment is the greatest of all?" And Jesus goes on to tell him, not only the greatest commandment, but also one that is equal to it.

The first commandment, is what the Jews call the Shema. It means "hear." Jewish children learn early on to memorize this commandment from the Book of Deuteronomy. And still, today, it's their central prayer. "Hear... hear... O Israel, the Lord your God is One... and 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." And then Jesus adds a second commandment from the Book of Leviticus, which is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says, "There are no other commandments greater than these." Upon "hearing" Jesus words, the scribe fully agrees, and repeats back with sincerity and conviction, that which Jesus has just told him. I don't know about you, but I'm somewhat envious of this scribe. I'm envious because of the fact that Jesus told him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." You are not far from the kingdom of God! If truth be told, I would love to hear Jesus say those words to me. And I'm sure you would as well. You see, our Lord praised the scribe because the man recognized the importance of those two commandments – that they embody what are the most essential things we should be doing in this life. Loving God and loving others.

So let's look for a moment at how we might compare to that scribe. Take the first commandment: 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. Now consider - do you love God like that? Who, or what, is the most important thing in your life? Who, or what, do you love the most? Is it really God? While I think most of us would want to answer yes, the reality is different. We don't love God first and foremost. We love our families, we love our friends, we love our activities, we love the things of this world more than we love God. Because the truth is, if we all did love God first, then wouldn't we be living in a world where peace and love and kindness and generosity and integrity are the hallmarks of our existence, rather than the anger and hatred and incivility and poverty and corruption we see today. If we all did love God first, wouldn't we be living our lives differently? You see, in the beginning, we were made to love God. When Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden, God came and walked with them in unbroken companionship. He loved them and they loved him. But they let the things of this world distract them from God's love, and after the fall, everything changed. We too are now prone to love the world, and the things of this world, more than God. And you can see the result. Perhaps that's exactly why King David prayed, "Deliver me from all my transgressions." But he also prayed, "Yet, still Lord, my hope for salvation is in you."

So what are we to do? History does not support a theory that we humans are successful at eradicating sin and its consequences. Quite the contrary. So that being the case, how can we ever be saved? God's answer to that question is simple. God's answer is, of course, Jesus... not only through his great sacrifice for us on the cross for our sins, but also through his divine teaching and wisdom and example of how we are to live. That's precisely why Jesus immediately takes us to that second greatest commandment, which is really equal to the first. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." You see, Jesus' divine logic here is that since we live in a fallen world, and we don't always love God the way we should, then we should at least love what and who God loves. That's what the wonderful little story I told you at the beginning of my sermon was all about. And what and who does God love? Well, God loves everything and everyone he has made. So we are commanded to love everyone – that's how we tell God we love him. By loving our neighbor. Who now will love me? Who now will love my people? Is it you? Will you love others with patience and compassion and mercy and understanding? For in doing so, you might even hear the Lord's spirit whisper to you those words, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

On this All Saints Day consider the fact that our life is a but one short opportunity to say yes to God's love by following his greatest commandment. Amen!

O Heavenly God, we come today, wanting to love you with all our heart, our mind, our soul and our strength. Because down deep, we know that if we love you with our whole being, then we will follow you, obey you, and trust you, and our lives will be better for it. But we confess that too often we love other people and other things more than you. We don't put you first. And so on this day where we remember Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we ask your forgiveness. Yours is an unimaginable love that said "I will die for your salvation." And not only for yours, but for all my children, everywhere. And so, in love for you, help us love what you love, who you love, with as much love as we can. For in this way, we might actually be able to make a difference in our own little part of the world. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.