

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
October 31, 2021
Mark 12:28-34

Awaken us, O God, to your vision. Help us to see with your eyes so that we might love you with our whole selves and love our neighbor in return. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

“Thou Shalt Not Be Horrible”

“Which commandment is the first of all?” the scribe asks Jesus. It’s an important question. What is most central? What matters most? What does it mean to say, “I am a Christian.” Do I need to sign something, or subscribe to something? What is essential?

Greg Garrett, a novelist, professor of English at Baylor University and a lay preacher in the Episcopal Church, remembers welcoming Maya Angelou to Baylor for a lecture. He’d invited her to teach one of his English classes, and he remembers after the class trying to thank her. He became a little condescending and said, “And to think, you’re a Christian.” He remembers, “She had taken my hand. She still had it as she looked at me; a gentle smile broke across her face, and she shook her head. “Oh, honey,’ she said in that deep voice, ‘I’m not a Christian. I’m trying to be a Christian.’” (pp.11-12, *The Other Jesus*)

There’s a lesson to be learned in that.

What does it mean to be a Christian?

The closest someone usually comes to asking me this question is in a new member class. “What do I need to believe,” people want to know. It’s a fair question; I mean, if we’re going to ask people to sign on the dotted line, they have a right to know what’s in the agreement. But the truth is when we ask them, “Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”, which we do at membership, most of us here probably have very different ideas as to what it means to say yes to that, while others are still working out

their theology. Personally, I don't have a problem with this. To me, there's no better place to work through one's theology than in the community of faith, especially a Presbyterian one that values curiosity, honors one's uncertainties, and understands that there's more to faith than intellectual assent. Because in addition to having one's mind in the game, one has to have one's heart in the game, too. Which is why 2 of our 3 questions for membership are about how you're going to live once you say "yes".

"Good teacher, which commandment is the first of all?" the scribe, a religious teacher himself, asks it. And it's a good question. What is most important? What is the moral bedrock on which we can live a Godly life? What is the one commandment that sums up our religion? The answer Jesus gives is the only answer and everybody knew it. Faithful Jews recited it from memory twice daily. Some still do. It's often put into a small box called a mezuzah that is mounted to doorposts. I can remember seeing them at the door of every hotel room at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. The answer is also worn on the foreheads and wrapped around the wrists of Orthodox Jews.

The answer to the scribe's question is called the Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength." Mark adds mind to "heart, soul, and strength," which is a good addition, in my opinion. The mind is missing in too many religious exchanges these days.

Here Jesus articulates the bedrock of his and our faith: the oneness of God and the imperative to love God with our entire selves. This is our sole purpose.

But how do we love God? Before the scribe asks Jesus this question, Jesus answers it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This commandment is so familiar to us that it has become a Christian cliché. But behind the familiarity is a radical new idea and a whole new way of thinking about religion. You see in Jesus' day, love of God was expressed and practiced in rules to follow and prohibitions to be obeyed. Burnt offerings and sacrifices were made in the temple as a way of showing one's

love and devotion for God. And the temple, literally, was considered the navel of the earth, connecting the world to God. So to be in the temple was to be in God's presence. Therefore it was the center of one's devotion and love for God.

But by the time of Jesus, the temple had become a source of conflict because it had become a center of corruption. Those burnt offerings and sacrifices that were once made to God, were now used to exploit the poor and marginalized; to keep the poor, poor; and the marginalized in their place. And this was done in the name of God; people justified their actions by making a religious claim that this is what God wants.

Of course today we're still at it, still using religion to justify ourselves and our views even when our views don't show much love for our neighbor. But Jesus wasn't interested in a religion that generally agrees with him but doesn't follow his example. Goodness, morality, and righteousness for Jesus is a matter of kindness, caring, extravagant, limitless, unreasonable, and counterintuitive love. As Barbara Brown Taylor said, "With all kinds of opportunities to tell people what to think he instead told them what to do. Wash feet. Give your stuff away. Share your food. Favor reprobates. Pray for those who are out to get you. Be the first to say, "I'm sorry." When we do those things, we are loving God by loving our neighbor.

Last week I came across new book titled: "If God is Love, Don't be a Jerk". It doesn't get any plainer than that, my friends. The book opens with a good laugh at some of the incredible mistakes people make in their jobs: a fast food worker who puts the melted cheese on top of the bun; the plumber who installs the toilet lid below the seat itself; the sign maker who paints the arrow going left on a sign that states "Keep to the right." They had one job! How could they not get it right? Were they distracted? Not properly informed? Lazy? When people miss the mark so spectacularly we want to know how anyone could get the main thing wrong.

The author then writes: "I imagine Jesus knows well the curiosity that comes with watching people given clear direction lose their way. I often envision an exasperated Jesus coming back, and the first words out of his

mouth to his followers as his feet hit the pavement are “You had one job: love!”

This is our only job – to love. And the best way we can show our love for God is to love our neighbor. And so we do it by tutoring school kids, or donating food, or making a meal at the Rescue Mission. We do it by volunteering to help someone who needs an extra hand, or calling to see if they’re OK. You do it staying with it, past weariness, until the job is done: rocking the baby, changing the diaper, reading the story when you can barely keep your eyes open. You love God with all your heart and soul and mind when you care for your aging parent, brother, or sister, when you stay late to finish the job, the surgery, the case, the deal, when you go over it one more time to get it right. You love God with all your heart and soul and mind when you do what God has called you to do, what God has gifted you to do, with everything in you. (*“For the Love of God”, John Buchanan, November 5, 2006*)

That’s how we love God with our heart and soul and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves. And we even love our neighbor when our neighbor isn’t very loveable. After the terrible church bombing in Birmingham, Martin Luther King Jr. said that it’s a good thing Jesus didn’t command us to like our neighbor. It’s a reminder that is desperately needed today.

According to the Talmud, a Gentile asked two of the best known teachers to teach him the whole of the Torah while standing on one foot. The first teacher drove him away with a stick because he said the Torah could not be crystallized. But the second one responded: What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereon; go and learn it.” *What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereon; go and learn it.”*

“Which commandment is the first of all?” the scribe asks Jesus. It is an important question. What is most central? What matters most? What does it mean to say, “I am a Christian.”

Quite simply put: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. That is the only essential.

Everything else is commentary.

Amen.