

God's Great Command
Mark 12: 28-34
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We all celebrate anniversaries. This past weekend Amy and I went to Alton Illinois to preside over the wedding of Laura's best friend Danny. Danny and his spouse were insistent that the wedding be on October 24th because it coincided with the 50th wedding anniversary of his grandparents. The next day Danny and his spouse attended the renewal of vows of his grandparents in honor of them. Sometimes we need to be reminded what is most important in life. For them, it was the reminder of those vows to love and cherish one another as the foundation of a healthy marriage. Today the protestant church around the world is also celebrating an anniversary. Today is Reformation Sunday, the Day that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg church. Martin Luther wrote these in protest of the selling of indulgences by the church to finance the building of St. Peter's Square. These indulgences were like "get out of hell free cards" offering people a way to buy forgiveness for future sins. Martin Luther had come to understand that Salvation is not something one can earn or purchase but is a gift of grace from God given to the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. He was calling for the church to reform, to repent of straying from the essential truth of the Gospel. Protestant churches around the world, especially Lutherans, celebrate Reformation Sunday as a type of renewal of vows and to allow us to remember that God's unconditional Love for the world is the essence of the Gospel message still today.

In today's Gospel reading we see another call for reform in today's reading. I want to set the scene a bit, because it is important to realize what happens just before this morning's text. The day before, according to the writer, Jesus had been in the temple turning over the money changer's tables and calling out to the religious leaders, 'My

house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." Mark 11:17.

Now it's the next day and there are two clear reactions from the religious authorities. One group, the majority, are seeking a way to discredit and perhaps arrest Jesus for heresy or some other crime because they feel their power and influence over the people has been challenged. The day before, Jesus called the religious authorities, corrupt and thieves in the practice of temple sacrifices. So, they are coming to him with trick questions to see if his answers will turn the people against him. But Jesus' answers are quite impressive, perhaps even inspiring, at least to one religious leader, a lawyer of the laws of Moses.

I think perhaps, between hearing Jesus disrupt the temple market accusing the temple institution as a corrupt practice of spiritual and economic abuse and Jesus' insightful answers to the disingenuous questions today, the lawyer wants a clear and straight answer about what Jesus would do instead? It is like he is saying, "ok, Jesus, if sacrifices to God for the forgiveness of sins is not right? What then is the one command that we should follow? What is the core of our faith, if it is not this central institution of sacrifices?"

Jesus strips it down to the bare bones. Jesus repeats the opening lines of the Shema, a prayer that every devout Jewish person says twice a day. Perhaps Jesus didn't need to recite the whole thing for the people in the temple, but I think it is important for us to remember the whole thing:

Deut. 6:4-9 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

This command reminds us that devotion and love of God is not an occasional thing, it is rather, the center of our faith, something that should be ever before us, and be the guiding mantra that shapes our lives.

But Jesus did not stop there and this is the part that I think confirms to the Lawyer that Jesus was speaking a deeper truth. The passage where Jesus quotes this second command comes from Lev. 19 and is a conclusion to a long list of commands that expand the last six commands from our Ten Commandments. Things like do not lie, steal, bear false witness and so forth. The section of these commands ends with these words:

Lev. 19:17-18 “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

Now Jesus could be saying that these commands both call us to love, but when I hear it, I wonder if he really meant was to say, loving God is like loving your neighbor or when we love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves we are loving God? Do you hear the difference? Let me say it again “When we love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, we are in fact loving God.” We get this idea of true faith from John’s Letters when he says, “Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Whoever says, “I am in the light,” while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling.” 1 John 2:7, 9-10. In chapter 4:20 John says this, “We love because he first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

In John's letters he goes on about this at great length showing how our love of God is most evident in how we treat our fellow human. In Matthew 25 Jesus says a similar thing when he said, "when you did this to the least of these, you have done it unto me." Throughout history, this simple and profound statement of the Greatest Commandment has challenged the church and individuals who seek to follow Christ.

In today's story, the lawyer has a reformation moment when he says in response to Jesus. "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'God is one, and besides God there is no other'; and 'to love God 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." Mark 12:31-32

The lawyer realizes that Jesus just took the faith back to the basics, reminding everyone what the essence of their faith should always be about. Living up to those words, this great commandment was really the only thing we need to be faithful.

On this Reformation Sunday, let us also remember the core and essential truth of the Gospel that we are called to live by. Let us reaffirm our commitment to the Greatest commandment, to Love God with all our heart, mind, body and strength and to love one another as much as we love ourselves."

This should always be the guiding question to the ministries of this church and our personal journey of faith. Is what we are doing based in hatred and rejection or based in love and acceptance? How can we love one another more? How can we love our neighbors more? Where do we need to do better in loving others?

Some have asked me, how are we going to grow the church again? What will it take? I think it starts right here. We need to renew our vows to Love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We need to remember this building was built to help us to love others more effectively. The beauty of this sanctuary aids us in loving and celebrating the Good News of God's unconditional love and inspire us to go forth in love and service to make our world a more loving world. Our end goal should always

be, “they will know we are Christ’s disciples by our love for one another.”