

Our scripture passage for this morning is one that is hard for a preacher to resist. After all, it promises to wrap up all of scripture into one neat little 6-verse bundle. “Which commandment is the first of all?” the scribe asks Jesus, a question that is rephrased in some translations as “which commandment is the greatest” or “which commandment is most important?” Isn’t that what we all really want to know? After all, in our pell-mell lives in the rush-rush society of 21st Century America, which of us really has time to read and digest all of this rather thick book? What we need is answers and fast. We like summaries and lists, Cliff Notes and Idiot’s Guides. What are the “7 Habits of Highly Effective People”? What wisdom and wit can we glean from David Letterman’s Top Ten lists? Who will be the “Five People (we) Meet in Heaven”? Who is Number One? Like the scribe, we are eager for the answer to all of life’s problems given to us in one simple package. What’s it all about, Jesus?

It’s really not hard at all to put ourselves in that scribe’s position this morning. His question seems to be an honest one. After all, by Jesus’ time, the careful exegetes of Torah had codified the Law of Moses into 613 prohibitions or commands, a lot to keep in mind as a guide to daily life. It was not at all uncommon for rabbis in the first century to offer their opinions as to the key to the whole thing. The great Rabbi Hillel, who is believed to have died in Jerusalem when Jesus was a boy, is remembered for giving the following advice to a Gentile who asked if he could summarize the law while standing on one foot: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary.”

As in so many of the stories in Mark’s Gospel, there is some ambiguity here about just what this scribe was up to. His question to Jesus could have been a trap, a hostile trick question designed to get him to say something that could be considered blasphemous. After all, Mark tells us that this question comes in the midst of a very long day, two days after Palm Sunday and a day after Jesus drove the traders from the Temple. All day long, various groups of the Jewish religious elite have been confronting Jesus in the Temple with questions that challenged his authority, set him up to offend either the people or the Roman occupiers, or called on him to resolve the kind of puerile questions that self-satisfied people often put to those who seek to expand their horizons. He’s just dealt with the Sadducees question about who in Heaven gets to claim the wife of multiple husbands, sort of the first century equivalent of the kid in George Carlin’s sketch about church who, in mocking a priest’s explanation of God’s omnipotence, asked, “Eh, Fadduh, if God can do anything, can He make a rock so heavy that He Himself can’t lift it?” The scribe’s question to Jesus could have been asked in the same spirit and his response to Jesus’ answer could have been patronizing, but I don’t think so. I think it’s revelatory that, after a day of dealing with overt hostility, Jesus uses this question to turn the subject to love.

It probably wouldn’t have surprised any of his listeners that day that Jesus started his response with the words, “Hear, O Israel.” Those words are the beginning of the verse we now find in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the opening of what is known as the Shema, the great prayer recited every day by all Jews. “Shema yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad -- Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” In the polytheism-prone culture of Israel under Moses, Joshua and the Judges, these words could have been understood as calling the people to allegiance to Yahweh above the rest: “Yahweh is our only God.” By the time of Jesus, Jews were firmly monotheistic and the Shema more likely an affirmation that “Yahweh is the only God.” If we were to say the Shema every morning, which meaning would we give it, I wonder? Contrary to the claims of

some, America today is an exceedingly pluralistic culture. Many gods are worshipped and not all of them are a part of what would normally be called “religions.” Certainly there are Hindu deities and ancestor worship from other lands, odd syncretistic religions of modern devising and even made-up religions that look for deities from outer space to come and raise elite humans to godhood. But many Americans also worship the gods of success and wealth, or beauty, or power over others. In the midst of all these different kinds of worship, do we claim Yahweh as revealed through Jesus as just *our* God of choice amidst all the rest or do we point to God to whom we give allegiance as *the* ultimate safe haven for *all* humankind? Is Yahweh *our* only God or *the* only God?

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” These words are also not unfamiliar to us. They have a nice poetic ring to them, don’t they? I’ve been rather belatedly reading a book this week that some friends gave me last Christmas on poetry in the Bible. This is certainly a wonderful example of the repetitive parallelism that the speakers and writers of the Hebrew in the Old Testament refined to an art form. But what do these words say to us, beyond their function as a rhetorical device? What does it mean to love God? I doubt that anyone here this morning would reduce that phrase to simply having a nice warm fuzzy feeling whenever the name of God is mentioned. Throughout the Bible it is clear that what God seeks is allegiance and action in response to love. Rev. Bryan Findlayson points out in his careful exegesis of these verses that the Greek of Mark does not say “love God with all your heart,” etc., but “love God out of all your heart,” and so forth. Loving God means that the response generated in our hearts, souls, minds and strengths, comes out of us and into the world in an active way. Loving God means taking action in allegiance to God and on behalf of God. We respond to God with all we have, all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds and all our strength. It’s worth noting, I think, that in Hebrew thought, the heart was the center of intellectual processing rather than of passion as in Greek thought. Our love for God must involve our intellects – we cannot unthinkingly parrot catechisms or creeds, we cannot react to life in blind faith. But I think we would also do well to remember that Mark did write in Greek and likely chose this word carefully, because there is some variance between how Jesus is quoted in the three synoptic Gospels and also between the various versions of this Deuteronomic citation in translations common in the first century. For Mark’s Greek audience, Jesus’ mention of the heart would have implied a passionate response to God. We must not allow our faith to become dry and scholastic. Loving God enough to take action does imply a deep feeling and passionate allegiance that must balance and be balanced by our thoughtful response to God’s calling. As the deer longs for flowing streams, so must our souls long for relationship to the living God.

I am greatly indebted this morning to Joan Hightower, who brought one of Rod Romney’s books, Journey to Inner Space, to share a passage for our devotional time at Wednesday’s deacons’ meeting. Dr. Romney wrote this about the all-consuming passion of loving God: “The ultimate human quest is not for outer space. It is not for things. It is not for people or a person. The ultimate human quest is for love, a love that is only satisfied when we allow ourselves to be found by God who loves us as no other ever can. The deepest human longing is for God, even though for many that longing has no name. The search for the human spirit, for the kingdom of heaven that Jesus said lives in each of us, and for the inner space where God may be fully embraced by the arms of the soul – this is what we were made for. It is a lonely journey, for God

is only truly encountered where all other things and persons vanish. And as has been pointed out, there are certain perils in such a journey. But not to take that journey will produce even greater loneliness and a peril of utmost devastation.” Thank you, Rod, and thank you, Joan.

“The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” I think some Christians are still surprised that this idea was not original to Jesus. It is found in Leviticus 19:18 and, as we’ve already heard, its famous corollary, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” wasn’t original to Jesus, either. This ethic of reciprocity was taught in various forms by Hillel, by Confucius and by Mohammed. The concept may be found in the Mahabharata of the Hindus, in the scriptures of the Sikhs, the Buddhists and the Baha’i. Seneca the Younger wrote in his book of morals, “Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your superiors.” Great pagan thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, Epictetus, Diogenes and Aristotle have given voice to this Golden Rule as have such famous non-Church philosophers as Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Paul Sartre and even the Marquis de Sade. Clearly, good standing with the Christian church is not needed to espouse this second of the greatest commandments. So what makes it so hard to live out this apparently universal ideal?

I believe the answer lies in Jesus’ conjunction of these two great commandments as the very core of the abundant life. We cannot truly live one without living the other as well. We cannot love God without also loving our neighbor, God’s children, all of God’s Creation. But we cannot love our neighbor, whom we so often find unlovable, without the strength that comes to us from a loving relationship with God. It is simply too easy to fall into hatred. The great contemplative, Thomas Merton, wrote this: “The beginning of the fight against hatred, the basic Christian answer to hatred, is not the commandment to love, but what must necessarily come before in order to make the commandment bearable and comprehensible. It is a prior commandment to believe. The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but the faith that one is loved...by God although unworthy or rather irrespective of one’s worth!” As we are reminded in I John, because God loves us, we can and should love one another.

Let’s be honest about this. Sometimes it’s really hard to love those who are different from us, especially those who disagree with us, those in whom we see more hate than love. Among the progressive Southern Baptists in whose nurture I came of age, the preacher and writer Will Campbell is sometimes held up as a great exemplar of how to live out love for the other. For some, though, he’s taken it too far. A native Mississippian, ordained at 17, Campbell was one of the four people, in 1957, who escorted the nine black students who integrated the schools of Little Rock, Arkansas. He was the only white person to attend the meeting called by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He’s served as a race relations consultant for the National Council of Churches, spoken out against the death penalty and helped Vietnam-era draft resisters find sanctuary in Canada. But he’s also, rather infamously, entered into ministry and friendship with national leaders of the Ku Klux Klan. He regularly sipped whisky with the Grand Dragon of the North Carolina Klan, for example. Campbell is on record as saying, “anyone who is not as concerned with the immortal soul of the dispossessor as he is with the suffering of the dispossessed is being something less than Christian...Mr. Jesus died for the bigots as well.” Now, that, my friends, is a hard calling. Commentator Dan Clendenin compares Will Campbell’s actions with the words of the 7th

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Century theologian, Maximus the Confessor: “Blessed is the one who can love all people equally...always thinking good of everyone.”

So, if we're not ready to love as unreservedly as Will Campbell, and I confess right now among you that I would have trouble drinking bourbon, sweet tea, lattes or anything else with some people, what are we to do? How then shall we live in a way that honors God and shows our love for our neighbor inasmuch as we have strength?

First, even if we're not ready to sit at table with those we think of as enemies, we must be ready to acknowledge them at least as God's children. We must be ready to accept that some of what those who disagree with us say is true. Throughout the gospels, the scribes are seen in company with the Pharisees as antagonists of Jesus. They are part of the party that is continually trying to discredit him, to get him in trouble with either the people or the Romans. And yet, Mark tells us, when Jesus saw that this scribe answered wisely, he gave him credit for his understanding. “You are not far from the kingdom of God,” Jesus tells him. As one commentator on this passage points out, “Jesus' words fly in the face of the attitude that those with whom we disagree theologically have no access to God. Christians who say that Christians from other denominations (or with different beliefs) are separated from God have not understood the implications of this story. More importantly, they have failed to put into practice the clear teaching of Jesus that we are to love our neighbors. Condemning our neighbors to hell because we disagree with them is hardly a demonstration of love.” We must be careful in all our disagreements to uphold the dignity and worth of the other, no matter how deeply we may think the divide goes in our understandings.

Secondly, we must stand ready to engage in active love with any of our neighbors who we are capable of helping. Here at Good Shepherd, we are already engaged in several efforts on behalf of our neighbors, particularly for those whom Jesus called “the least of these.” Our plans to build affordable housing for seniors will take another step forward this week as Lynn Melby and I meet with representatives of American Baptist Homes of the West, Beacon Development and the architects selected for our project. There will also be a meeting this week of several Good Shepherd members to find ways to implement our plans for landscaping our campus to better serve our community with improved “pea patches,” a wedding facility and a meditation garden. Other opportunities to reach out in love to neighbors both far and near will also be presenting themselves in upcoming days. Our Evergreen Association of American Baptists has recently voted to investigate ways to help children who are struggling in our public schools with tutoring based at our churches. This dovetails with current programs at National Ministries of ABC-USA designed to assist children in poverty and to promote the health of the public school system. Our association is also studying ways to involve our churches in our denominational ministries in Haiti, one of the neediest countries in the world and one right at America's doorstep. All of these plans and programs are too involved for me to explain at length here but let me encourage any and all of you who are interested in either of these efforts to talk with me soon and let me help you get plugged in to the conversation.

“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 love your neighbor as yourself.” My sisters and brothers, if we can understand these things and do them, then we are not far from the kingdom of God, the beloved

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community which heals all of Creation and brings all of humankind together in one family. Through the Holy Spirit, the promised comforter, we have the power to pursue this abundant life. We have reason to hope for refreshment for our thirsty souls, we have reason to lift up our hearts to God. For we are loved by God, that is why we can love in return. God's great love for us is the root of our love, our hope and our joy. Thanks be to God.