

FIRST LESSON: Deuteronomy 6:1-9  
SECOND LESSON: Mark 12:28-34  
October 31, 2021

***“The Heart of the Matter”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A little boy came running to his mom from his first day at Sunday School.

“Mommy, Mommy!” he said. My Sunday School teacher is Jesus’ granny!  
“And what makes you think that?” asked his amazed mother.

“It’s obvious,” he answered in an exasperated five-year-old voice. “She loves him so much she never stops talking about him!”

The encounter between Jesus and the scribe that we read today is an important one. It is so important that it appears in Matthew and Luke as well. We don’t know if Mark was their source or if they all had another common source, but clearly, they all must have considered this an essential part of Jesus’ teaching. Matthew and Luke portray this scribe as an adversary, whereas Mark’s version is not really negative at all. In Mark the question appears to be sincere. And it was the kind of question that rabbis discussed all the time, rabbinic argument being a favorite pastime of many.

The scribe asked very simply, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”, or as some versions have it, “the greatest.” Now here is where I would make a terrible Orthodox Jew. The law includes 613 commandments. I am just not good at keeping that many rules. There are 365 negative “DON’T do this” kind of rules and 248 positive, “do this” rules. And the rabbinical teachers then and now divided them into “light” and “heavy” commandments. The light ones are obviously less important than the heavy ones. Two of the most important rabbis who taught near the time of Jesus had their own versions. Hillel (110 BCE -10 CE) who died as a very old man when Jesus was a child said, “What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole law; the rest is commentary.” Rabbi Akiva who was born about two decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection (50 CE – 135 CE) said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Both Hillel and Akiva, however, would have placed as preeminent the words of the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,” (Deuteronomy 6: 4-5). “Shema” (shi-MAH) means, “to hear.”

Jesus’ teaching was completely in line with the central tenets of Judaism. But he added something. He added the word “mind”. Deuteronomy has heart, soul and strength. Jesus has heart, soul, mind and strength. This may not be as much of a change as we think, however. The Jewish

understanding of human psychology placed some of human emotion and all of the intellect and will in the heart. Literally. No one could figure out what that strange grey lump in the skull was for. Greco-Roman culture also had not figured out the purpose of various organs but they had some really creative ideas. Nevertheless, they separated out “mind” or intellect from emotion. Jesus was speaking to a new culture, and by including “mind” made sure all the bases were covered.

We are to love God in a total way and we are to love God with agape love, which as I have said many times before has more to do with actions than emotions. It’s what we do that is the engine. Emotions are the caboose. We DO the next right thing, and our feelings catch up. But how do we show our love for God? When we get right down to it, how do we show our love for anyone?

If God were a human, we would show our love by paying attention to God and spending time with God. If I say I love someone but never spend any time with them and ignore them when they are talking to me, that’s not really love. In “God” terms that would mean worship, prayer, reading scriptures and just setting aside quiet time to sit with God. And just as in a valued human relationship, we have to commit to doing it. Couples can lose touch with each other with the demands of kids, work and everything else. They have to decide to make time for each other and make it happen. That is not always easy. In order for it to work it has to become part of our life pattern. An established family tradition is easier to do than something we do sporadically, and the same is true with the way we practice our faith.

The pandemic blew our regular worship traditions right out the window. And EVERYONE from churches all over are struggling with the effort to get back on track. It’s not just us. Life abruptly stopped, and things changed. Imagine if a married couple spent a year forced to live apart. It happens with military families all the time. Getting back together isn’t easy. Each individual develops new patterns and fills in the gaps, things that their partner did. Even if they love each other dearly coming back together is an adjustment. Things would have changed. They could never go back to the way it was “before.” Our world, including our church world, has changed because of the pandemic. It is going to take us awhile to get on our feet.

If God were a human we would show our love not only by spending time with God but also by sharing God’s values. We would consider important the things that God considers important. Justice and service, kindness and mercy, these are things that would be part of our lives. They would inform how we act, and what we support in society.

If God were a human we would show our love by sharing God’s priorities. The kingdom of God would be more important than material wealth. Praying for our enemies would be more important than being avenged for what they have done to us. This is probably one of the hardest things for us to do. Our priorities are not the same as God’s priorities.

If God were a human we would show our love by loving those God loves. We would love people. We would love our neighbors as ourselves. The two are inescapably connected. It is not possible to love God and hate people. It is fundamentally incompatible.

The commandment Jesus referred to, the “love your neighbor” part, is from Leviticus 19:18. It is not part of the Shema. But it is central to the teaching of the law, the wisdom literature and the prophets. All of scripture talks about the importance of right relationships with other people. While the legal parts of the Old Testament speak of rules, the wisdom literature found in Proverbs gives us advice, and the prophets call us beyond both to a life of compassion and justice. It is true that many Jews then and now have interpreted these words to apply only to other Jews. But God’s view according to the prophetic tradition is a broad view. How can we visibly demonstrate the kingdom of God if we only show mercy to people who are like us? Jesus makes this point vividly in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which in Luke’s gospel immediately follows this encounter. Who is our neighbor? If we ask who our neighbor is in order to set limitations on who we have to be nice to, we have missed the point entirely. It is everyone. It is even that person who is getting on our last nerve. We have to treat even that person the way we would want to be treated, which is the very essence of agape love.

A lot of contemporary American sermons given on the topic of loving our neighbor as ourselves go into the need for us to love ourselves first. Jesus does not mention this. He doesn’t seem to think we have any problem putting ourselves first. It’s a given of human nature. Even those who do everything for others and ignore their own needs are at some level doing this for themselves. We’re just not that self-sacrificing. Self-interest is instinctual. God knows this. We are not condemned for having the will to live. But we are judged by how we handle it. The human race wouldn’t last very long without the will to survive, but God does call us to look beyond our natural survival instincts and become more than an animal who simply reacts. God wants us to transcend to the level of a moral being.

Jesus told the scribe who agreed with him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” We think of a kingdom as a physical place, but what this word really means is the reign of God. Jesus was saying this man was close to living according to God’s will. To live in the kingdom of God is to walk in the perfect will of God. None of us can accomplish this on this side of heaven. But we can seek the kingdom every day.

The heart of the matter is love. We are to love God and we are to love one another. And when we are lacking in love we can seek God who has an endless supply. Without love, life is meaningless. Without love, a beautiful home is hollow and empty. Without love, all the success in the world will come up short. But we can make a simple decision to love God and show our love in how we live, and when we do, God’s love will transform us and God’s love will touch the world through us. Amen.

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

**6** These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to

possess,<sup>2</sup> so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. <sup>3</sup> Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.<sup>5</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.<sup>8</sup> Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Mark 12:28-34

<sup>28</sup> One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

<sup>29</sup> “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’<sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

<sup>32</sup> “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.<sup>33</sup> To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

<sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.