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Mark 12:28-34

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Psalms 119:1-8

Hebrews 9:11-14

October 31, 2021

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you 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.' ³¹The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³²Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³and 'to love him 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." ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

How many of you know our Gospel verses by heart? The verses otherwise known as the Great Commandment...can you recite them? Most of us, even if we can't recite them from memory know the basic gist of the text. God is love and we are to love. Sounds good. But, my favorite verse in our texts for today is the very last verse in our Gospel reading..."After that no one dared to ask him any question." I bet you never noticed this little sentiment because it's so overshadowed by the well-worn words of the previous verses.

Here's why I like it so much...I love that our Gospel writer acknowledges that immediately after the scribes ask Jesus what is his greatest commandment and as soon as he gives them a direct answer...Jesus is met with silence. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* And the scribes start the back away and dared not ask anything else. It's as though they wanted to ask the question but they didn't really want to know the answer...at least not *that* answer.

It reminds me of when kids complain that they are bored and ask, "Mom, Dad, what can I do? I'm so bored." As a parent, your eyes begin to twinkle at the opportunity in front you. "Well...you can clean your bathroom, sweep the garage, vacuum the house, rake the leaves." And, then, utter silence and maybe an eye roll as they try to back away without being noticed. "Ummm" ...they say..."that's not what I was *really* asking."

After that no one dared to ask him any question.

This one verse shines a light on what many of us probably don't want to admit. We like to talk about love especially of God and of neighbor. We like to throw the concept around because it's feels good. We put the verse on our Facebook feeds and highlight it in our bibles. But, when we are actually required to love, not just a little but with our whole heart and mind and soul and

strength...to love in all that we do, in all that we say, in all that we think, to all people at all times....well, that is a whole other story. *But, Jesus, that wasn't what I was really asking!*

The fact is, we have gotten desensitized to what this kind of love really means...at least the kind of love Jesus is teaching about. And so when Bishop Curry so enthusiastically repeats time and time again, *if it's not about love, it's not about God*...I wonder...are we really listening...not just to our Bishop but to Jesus? Or, are we backing away hoping no one will notice? Using the words but not living the life.

Think about it. When Jesus says 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 You shall love your neighbor as yourself...Do you do that? Do you love with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength? Not just toward the things you like or the people you get along with...but with each and every person and situation that you encounter? Because, that's the kind of love Jesus is really talking about.

I don't mean to be a buzzkill but I don't think we do. I know I am guilty of backing away when it's uncomfortable or when I don't have the time. I like to pick and choose when and where I show love. And, not to mention that I really love preaching about love. I can at times be better at talking the talk instead of walking the walk.

So for a teaching as well-worn as loving our neighbor, sometimes I find it helpful to find new language to approach a familiar concept. Language that helps us apply the lesson more fully in our daily lives and commit to following this commandment with greater discipline.

To do that, I want us to consider the practice of *integrity*. I recently heard a powerful interview with sociologist, Martha Beck, who has spent much of her research studying the effects of integrity within individuals and social groups. And when I heard her talk about integrity I thought it was extremely compelling to apply Jesus' teaching in a new and impactful way.

Most of us immediately think of integrity as *the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles* but the second definition and the one I want us to work with this morning is *the state of being whole and undivided*.

Beck says this...the word integrity comes from the root word *intact* or integer. Do you remember what an integer is from math class? It's a number that is whole, it isn't a fraction or broken into pieces. It is a thing that is complete in itself.

Therefore, if you live in a place of integrity, you live in wholeness, completeness. You are intact in all of your actions, words, and thoughts. Your convictions align with your purpose. Your intentions and actions and words and feelings are undivided with who you are and what you believe.

Now, you can apply the concept of integrity to all sorts of things in your life...but what would this idea of integrity mean for us specifically as Christians if we applied it to the Great Commandment?

Read the verse again...

'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you 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.' ³¹*The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*"

Notice...the Lord is one. God is whole. God is not divided in purpose or action. God is integrity. So when we say God is love, we are saying that God's love is completely unified and thus God's creation is fully unified into that love, into that sense of integrity. That's our starting point.

And, we, as God's much-loved creation, are to seek that same wholeness within the things we create. We are to love with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind and with every bit of our strength. Not some of our heart or some of our soul or some of our mind and with a little bit of our strength. It has to come forth in all parts of who we are. It has to be unified. That's Christian integrity.

This is the love that Jesus is talking about...love is undivided and whole. And that wholeness means living into a complete expression of faith with all that we say and do especially when it is inconvenient, especially when it is difficult and risky. If you take those inconvenient, risky moments out of the equation, and back away hoping no one will notice...you aren't living a life of Christian integrity.

We can't live one way when it's convenient and another way when it gets hard. When you do that, think of the turmoil you often feel, the angst, the frustration, the division with yourself and with others. It feels disjointed and unauthentic to what you claim to believe. You know in your gut that you aren't choosing love.

Here's something interesting about the research behind integrity...Martha Beck has found that when we live with integrity, in that place of deep truth, we have better health, better focus, we are more relaxed, we have greater purpose. It's as though Jesus knew that his teaching would not only create thriving communities but thriving individuals as well.

Jesus is describing what Christian integrity looks like and in doing so provides for us a path toward true fulfillment, true joy, and true purpose. It's a conviction that flows through our entire heart and mind and soul and strength.

So when you hear the words of the Great Commandment or when you are faced with a difficult situation, pause and ask yourself...am I living with Christian integrity? Are my words and actions and beliefs divided or are they unified in Christ? Do I choose to love when it is convenient and safe or do I choose to love at all times and with all people?

It's the charge of our text from Deuteronomy..."⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite 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." This is wholeness. This is the undivided life that Christ offers us.

Because the Lord is indeed one; and we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all of our mind, and with all our strength. And at all times we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Thanks be to God. Amen.