

FIRST LESSON: Deuteronomy 6:1-9
SECOND LESSON: Mark 12:28-34
November 3, 2024

“With All Your Heart”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Scribes and Pharisees loved to discuss points of the law endlessly. The internet did not exist. There was no social media, no TV. Music had to be played live or not at all. No electricity. No cars. Most people could not read. What did they do? They talked. They argued and debated. Normally it was the men who did this. The women were too busy. But the men could spend hours discussing matters of faith and tradition following different schools of thought. And the arguments/discussions could be neutral or become heated. In the case of Jesus and the scribe we don't really know what tone was used. Matthew and Luke portray him as an adversary, but Mark is a bit kinder. In Mark the question appears to be sincere. The scribe asks very simply, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”, or as some versions have it, “the greatest.”

This was not a random question. It was a very standard one. All of the leading rabbis had an opinion on it, and the man wanted to know what Jesus thought. The law includes 613 commandments. There are 365 negative “DON'T do this” rules and 248 positive, “do this” rules. The rabbinical teachers then and now divided them into “light” and “heavy” commandments. The light ones were obviously less important than the heavy ones. Two of the most important rabbis who taught near the time of Jesus had their own versions of what was most important. 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. But this in fact probably just reflects a change in the cultural understanding of how humans were put together. The Jewish understanding of human psychology placed some of human emotion and all of the intellect and will in the heart. They also did not clearly identify the heart with the organ we know of as the

heart. It was in that region but a bit vague. And few people in the 1st century, Jew or Gentile, had any idea what that strange grey lump in the skull was for. Greco-Roman culture knew there were problems if it got damaged, but that's as far as it got. The "mind" had nothing to do with the brain. But they did separate out "mind" or intellect from emotion. Jesus was speaking to a new culture, and by including "mind" he made sure all the bases were covered.

In stating things the way he did Jesus said we are to love God in a TOTAL way with all that we are. 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.

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.

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 fundamentally incompatible to love God and hate people.

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 one. 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.

Is this easy? Of course it's not easy! Self-interest is instinctual. God knows this. We are not condemned for having the will to live. But selfishness, rejecting those who are different from ourselves, attacking first and asking questions later, all of this is part of our broken sinful nature. Gossip and character assassination may make us feel superior for a little while, but it destroys community. The fracturing of society into those who are acceptable and safe and those who are unacceptable and dangerous is based on fear and prejudice. When we judge and reject, we destroy.

Jesus told the scribe who agreed with him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." What he meant was 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. Our love for God is seen in how we live and what we do. When we put God first we connect with the source of grace and love. God's love will transform us and God's love can 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, **2** 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. **3** 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.

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.¹ **5** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. **6** These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. **7** 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. **8** Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. **9** Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Mark 12:28-34

28 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?"

²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ 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: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

³² “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ 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.”

³⁴ 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.