

"Love, God and Neighbor"
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
November 4, 2018

Mark 12: 28-34

Over the last two months, we have read stories from the Gospel of Mark. We have witnessed Jesus healing the daughter of a persistent mother. We have heard Jesus affirm and then rebuke his disciple, Peter, who still didn't understand the depth of Jesus' love for him. We have listened to Jesus speak to a rich, young ruler, telling him in love that to have eternal life he must leave behind his love of his possessions and follow Jesus. And last week, Lisa showed us Jesus healing the blind man, Bartimaeus, who refused to believe as others believed, but who affirmed his faith in the Son of Man – and his sight was restored to the level of his faith.

We have walked this path with our Lord the last several weeks. It has been a path of reversal, a path of change, a path of faith. It has been a path toward Jerusalem, where Jesus is headed, and where he has predicted his death over and over and over. We have walked this path with Jesus, and we have been reminded through familiar stories that the depth of God's love for us will ultimately be shown in the events of Holy Week in Jerusalem.

I know the calendar says that we are only four weeks from the beginning of Advent. But in today's passage, we are actually a day or so after Palm Sunday; Jesus has entered Jerusalem in chapter 11, and today's story comes a few days before Maundy Thursday. Robin Meyers comments: *By the time we reach the 12th chapter of Mark, Jesus finds himself in the middle of a kind of theological cross-examination free-for-all. Priests, scribes, elders, and other assorted defenders of the letter of the law are swarming all over him in a frenzy of entrapment.*

First there's a question about divorce (with a follow-up from his own disciples), and nobody likes the answer . . . {And then he hears} "By what authority are you doing these things?" [In other words:] get the blasphemer's hook ready. Then comes the dark parable of the wicked tenants, and a question about taxes to test his citizenship. And finally, a real Mosaic brainteaser about seven brothers who do their brotherly duty by marrying each other's childless widow, only to find themselves all in heaven without a clue as to who gets to call her "my wife." With a deep sigh Jesus says, in effect, "You just don't get it."

That's when a nameless scribe, who has been hanging out on the fringe of the crowd, and cannot but be impressed by his own stamina, moves in for the kill. His question is the question, the let's-get-down-to-it-and-see-if-you-bleed Torah question: Which commandment is the first of all? (Robin R. Meyers, "Extra Credit," *The Christian Century*, October 25, 2000, 1069).

How does Jesus answer this question? With two answers. The scribe asks which commandment is the first, and Jesus gives him two answers. “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.” The scribe asks Jesus which single commandment is first, and Jesus says, “There are two.”

I wonder if the key to loving our neighbor as ourselves is to first consider how we love the Lord our God. In essence, that is what Jesus leads us to believe when he is asked what the greatest commandment is: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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’” (Mark 12:29-30). Before you examine your mission, your outreach, your evangelism as an individual and a church, you have to examine your own life as an expression of love for God. For it is with our whole being that we are to honor and love God: heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Lincoln Galloway notes: *The theme of love does not flow through or define the Gospel of Mark. In Mark, the focus on love comes at a very critical moment in the life and ministry of Jesus. His ministry is now centered in Jerusalem, and he has set himself against the temple cult. He has overturned tables and driven people out of the temple (11:15-18); the religious leaders have engaged him in debate (11:27-33; 12:13-17, 18-27); they are angered by his teaching, and want to arrest him (12:1-12; 11:18); his death at their hands is imminent. In this context, Jesus speaks words whose very particular demands are foundational to the faith* (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 263*).

In other words, when Jesus answers the scribe’s question, he’s not in some happy, cheery, wonderful place. He’s in the midst of a stress-filled, anxiety-laden time, when the public discourse is toxic, and the religious authorities are trying to entrap him. It is at this moment, this particular moment, that Jesus speaks of love.

It is love that is rooted first and foremost in love of God – the only one who is Lord. And that love of God is with every fiber of every part of our being. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:4 in this first commandment, but he adds a fourth component of our being which is not listed in the Old Testament: our minds. Loving God is not just about what our heart feels, or what our souls believe, or what our bodies know – but also what our minds think. I don’t know about you, but that is my reminder that my love for God is not limited to one or two components of my life; it must encompass ALL of my life – body, mind, soul, and heart.

As I said earlier, this story from Mark appears in Matthew and Luke, as well. In Matthew, it comes at a similar time in Jesus’ ministry: once he has entered Jerusalem in Holy Week. But in Luke, this comes earlier in Jesus’ ministry, and it is the introductory statement to the parable of the Good Samaritan. In Luke, the scribe answers Jesus with the answer given in Mark,

and Jesus tells him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live” (Luke 10:28). But the man needs further proof of his answer, and he asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” That is when Jesus gives him – and us – a parable which embodies the essence of God’s love: your neighbor is the one whom the world considers your enemy. The love we show in our lives should reflect the great lengths God has gone to love us in Jesus Christ.

I find it truly astounding how deeply we can be in pain as God’s people, and it can be impossible for us to reach across to a brother and sister to show them love. I have witnessed this in our current political climate, as we struggle to talk with civility about topics of public concern. On the one hand, I will be grateful when Tuesday is over, so that we do not have to watch and listen to these awful political advertisements from all sides. And yet, on the other hand, I know our country will continue to be deeply polarized, as we are tempted to look at those who hold a differing point of view as opponents, maybe even as enemies. When in fact, the truth is we are all children of God. How are we called to love our neighbor, when our neighbor has a totally different political stance, or social agenda, or moral compass than we do?

After the events of one week ago in our country, this passage speaks to us in a way that is poignant and powerful. For hatred toward a group of people – sisters and brothers of ours as children of God and of Abraham – for that hatred to be embodied in murder and violence in a house of worship – it is the antithesis of loving God and neighbor. Which is why it is all the more important, all the more pressing, all the more life-dependent that we embrace Jesus’ command to love the Lord our God with all our being, and to love our neighbor – ALL of our neighbors – as God has loved us. That love is made manifest in our speech, in our actions, and in our solidarity with those who are persecuted, who are marginalized, and who the world says is not deserving of God’s love. It must be not only in times of tragedy that we are called to this love – it is at ALL times of life that we are called to love God and neighbor as God has first loved us.

When you come to this table today, I invite you to receive the grace which is being offered to you. When you eat this bread, allow the pains of the past to fall away so that they do not consume you. When you drink this wine, allow the love of our Lord to fill your entire being. When you walk away from this table, use the strength which comes from this meal to love. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as if your life depended on it. Love this world, which is desperately searching for hope, peace and comfort. And then, maybe then, we will be just a little closer to embodying the kingdom of God as Jesus envisions it.

Thanks be to God for this amazing, transforming love. Amen.