

31 October 2021: Mark 12:28-34 (Proper 26)

He is asked, “Which commandment is the first of all?” In Jesus’ day this was the kind of question used to assess the basic content and perspective of a rabbi’s teaching. As an example, a story from the generation before Jesus: Rabbi Hillel the Elder was challenged by a Gentile to “teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” That is, give me the Reader’s Digest version. Hillel replied to the questioner, “what is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereof; go and learn it.”

That this scribe is asking the question indicates that he probably had no prior direct experience of Jesus’ teaching; perhaps only hear-say. He wants to find out for himself. Jesus’ answer is familiar to: *...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.* Let us take a deeper look.

The word “heart” indicates not one’s emotions but the core of one’s being. “Soul” refers to the gift of life one receives from God, intended for communion with God. “Mind” signifies not merely one’s intellect and reason, but that part of us that is able to apprehend God, thereby affecting one’s consciousness, and conscience. “Strength” denotes our will and physical being, our bodies.

Jesus clearly specifies that faith is exercised in the totality of our personhood. He says, love God with *all* one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength’. Therefore, faith in Christ is not one among many allegiances. Faith in Christ is what defines and informs all other allegiances.

As if this were not daunting enough, Jesus adds a second greatest commandment: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

The word ‘neighbor’ is easily defined, but the definition is not what we expect. For us, neighbor is someone who lives near us. For Jesus, the designation “neighbor’ is expansive. In the Gospels “neighbor” is not defined geographically but by the condition of those whom we encounter anywhere and everywhere. This is surely the point of the Parable of Good Samaritan, in which a hated foreigner comes upon an utter stranger in desperate need and does what the Samaritan can to minister to the victim, in his need. If you prefer, think of Mr. Rogers, for whom every child who watched, indeed, every child everywhere, is ‘neighbor.’ Therefore, the old excuse that we need not be concerned with the suffering of those not in our immediate orbit is baseless.

Clearly loving God and loving neighbor, defined by need not location, are both indispensable: *There is no other commandment greater than these.* For Jesus loving God and neighbor are not even two sides of same coin. These two are the interweaving threads of atonement. That’s how we must conceive and live our faith. That old word, “atonement.” Atonement is not about ‘getting to heaven.’ Atonement is defined literally by the component parts of the word: “at-one-ment.” God desires to draw you into his own divine life, to be “at one” with God and you “at one” in God. And we see in Jesus that God’s desire is far beyond the personal. *God so loved the world.* God’s desire is to “at-one” everyone. All people, all creation “at-one” in God, with one another.

Through faith and trust we receive God’s “one-ing” in Christ. And through our love and care for others we make real on our diminutive level, in our everyday environments and relationships God’s will for the universe. Loving one’s neighbor is more than being nice or even doing the right thing. When we love our neighbor—those in need and necessity—we make real, we embody God’s plan of salvation for all through one’s own life and in the lives of others. Therefore, love of neighbor is the true test of our love of God, our faith in Jesus Christ, our empowerment by the Holy Spirit. We become Christ followers, loving Jesus in our neighbor, loving our neighbor for Jesus’ sake.

Remember this: we are all works in progress. To love God with all one’s heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love neighbor as self takes a lifetime and more of practice. God does not expect perfection, but God does yearn for our progress. Everyday is an opportunity to grow in love of God and neighbor. Surrender past failings and ask for God’s help today. Resolve to love God today, to love neighbor today. Everything else grows from there.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.