

The Greatest Commandment

November 4, 2018

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.

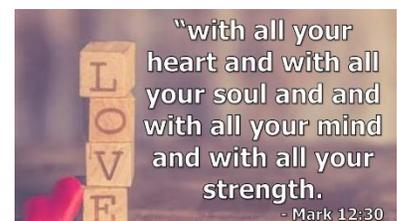


Today we begin our new sermon series with a message entitled "The Greatest Commandments". In our scripture passage today, Jesus is basically asked what really matters in our faith and His response is "love". This sermon series, called "Gifts of Love", will center around how we are called to love. Love can express itself in many forms and in many ways, but in almost all cases, love is a gift that we offer to another. Whether it is our time, our talents, our resources, or whatever, when we give to another we are expressing love for them. Sometimes

the gift is freely and joyfully given, sometimes it involves some pain or sacrifice on our part, and sometimes it involves both of these things. For the month of November, we will look at various ways that our faith calls us to give both to God and to others in gifts of love. Let us pray...

As our passage today opens, we find that a scribe is impressed with the answers that Jesus has been giving to the religious leaders. This leads him to ask a question of Jesus. Often with the religious folks, when they ask Jesus a question it is to trap or trick Him. But I do not believe that this is the case in today's passage. I believe that the scribe really wants to know what Jesus thinks. The scribe asks Jesus, *"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"* For Jesus, there was a great deal of choice in how to answer this question. By this time in Judaism, there were over 600 commandments and rules that governed the life and worship of a devout Jew. Jesus hones right in on what is called the *shema*. Over time, this commandment had become the central focus of the twice daily prayers offered to God by all good Jews. The shema would be said every morning and every evening. This is the answer that almost all rabbis would give if asked this question. Jesus' answer would not surprise the scribe or any other religious leader.

Quoting from Deuteronomy 6, Jesus answers, *"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 mind and with all your strength"*. In other words, how are we supposed to love God?...



With all that we are. With all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength – with every fiber of our being. We are to love God completely and fully. What does this love look like? How does it manifest itself? I think it looks like a life fully surrendered to and obedient to God. It looks like a life whose sole focus is to serve God by worshipping God, by adoring God, by praising God, by following God's will for our lives. It looks like a life that brings glory to God in all we do, say, and think.

Does this sound like your life? Does it look like your life? Does it feel like your life? Mine neither. At least not always. I want it to be my life. Sometimes it is. But not as often as I would like it to be. Not as often as it should be. I am led to wonder why. Why is it that I want to love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, but fail? To be honest, there is a lot of competition. Self is the primary competition with God. Simply put – I want my way. I want to call the shots, to run the show, to make the decisions, to be in charge. How about you? Are you also your primary obstacle to fully loving and serving God?

The world is the secondary competition for God's love. The world tells us all kinds of lies that lead us away from God. Yes, we deserve that new car. Yes, we should do whatever it takes to get that promotion. Yes, we should indulge in food or drink or whatever else makes us feel good at the moment. Yes, we should dream about and lust after that beautiful woman or handsome man. Yes, yes, yes. Isn't that the message of the world – just do whatever makes you feel good or better or maybe even numb? When we look outside of our relationship with God for our joy, for our happiness, for our contentment, for our peace, then we have made other things our gods. When we consider our wants and desires

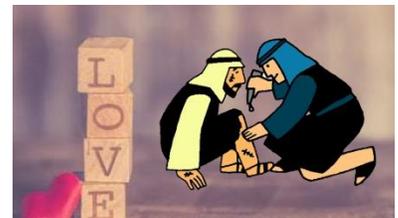
more important than God's will and way for our lives, then we have made ourselves god. And when our selfishness combines with the lies of the world, watch out!! We begin to live out a me-first, gratification-based lifestyle. Here, in that lifestyle, there is no room left to love God even a little, never mind with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.



Jesus follows up this first command with a second commandment, saying, "*The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'*". If we find it challenging to love

God fully, then this call to love our neighbor as ourselves might be very hard. I believe the second commandment hinges upon the first. Earlier, we defined love as a gift that we offer to one another, to God, to our church. The gift can come in the form of our time or our talents or our resources or whatever else we can give to another. Any gifts that we give to another are expressions of love for that person, for God, for our church. So, on the personal level, the real question to wrestle with here is the one that was asked in Luke's version of this story: "who is my neighbor"? In Luke 10,

when asked what really matters in our faith, Jesus explains who our neighbor is by telling the story of the



good Samaritan. Jesus knew that we would find it easy to love our families, our friends, those who are like us. But when the man who was robbed was really in need of someone to stop and care for him, those who the culture would have expected to be loving and neighborly, the priest and the Levite, they walked past. It was the hated Samaritan who stopped and helped the man. It was the enemy who offered radical hospitality to the man in need of help. Jesus was

asking that if such a person – a Samaritan - could be a good neighbor to the person in need, couldn't we be a good neighbor too?



As we delve into the Word of God, we find many other examples of people who Jesus identified as a neighbor. Throughout scripture, Jesus' list is very consistent. Over and over, He named the orphan and the widow, the outcast and the lonely, the imprisoned and the leper, the sinner and the prostitute, the Gentile and the Samaritan, the deaf, lame, mute, blind. For Jesus, the neighbor is all people, but they are especially those that the average Jew looked down upon, ignored, or shunned. Last week, we met one such person – Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. In our passage last week, Jesus modeled what it looks like to love a neighbor. How would we best summarize who Jesus said our neighbor was? For Jesus, our neighbor is everyone – but especially those people who no one else can love. That is the mark of the Christian – that we love the “other” with a pure and holy love, in the love that Jesus modeled.

Most of us have had experiences where we have been challenged to love someone that is hard to love. Often times what makes the person hard to love is a prejudice inside of us, is a stereotype that we believe, or is something about ourselves that we dislike and see in those that we find hard to love. And, of course, at times you and I have been that neighbor that is hard to love. At times we have been stubborn or mean or unkind or selfish or arrogant or... and we have been downright hard to love. When I look at the times when sin has had a grip on me, I can see that for some people in my life, I was hard to love. At

times I have made it hard for my parents or my wife or my kids or my friends to love me. Yes, at times, we have all been that neighbor that was hard to love. And, every once in a while, there comes a time when I think it is hard for even God to love me.

While God never stops loving us, at times I think we do make it hard for Him to love us. When our hearts become hardened or when we are deep in our sin, when we are running as far from God as we can – then I think we might be hard to love. Yet God loves us still. Even then, God loves us and pursues us. Even when we are so lost in our sin that we cannot sense God, even then our God loves us and does all He can to bring us back into a right relationship. Even then. It is from this example, from this point of reference, that we begin to learn how to love others, how to love our neighbor, how to love those who are hard to love. When we come to see the depth of God’s love for us and when we can see how God’s love rescued us from our sin, over and over and over and over, then we can begin to see how that same love can go out to others. This becomes part of our story. The story of how God reached out and rescued us from our sin is a powerful witness, a great testimony. It is a great gift of love that we each have and can offer to another. It becomes even more powerful when the love of God in us is so well understood and appreciated that it becomes something that we must share with others.



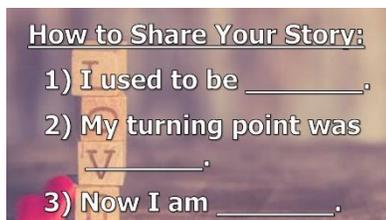
In early October, at the Reach conference that we attended in Sioux Falls, Pastor Roz Picardo spoke of the importance of telling our story. He cautioned us that

sometimes we think our story too small, too insignificant, too ordinary. To these thoughts he posed this question: what would your life be like without Jesus? I ask you, what would your life be like without Jesus? Our story is about who we are today because of Jesus. We have all been changed by Jesus. That, in and of itself, is a story worth sharing. The key to sharing our story, of course, is knowing our story. It can be quite simple to know our story. Just as with all good stories, our faith story needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. Using Roz's words, our story must "tell what life was like before Jesus, must share our Jesus encounter, and must tell what our life is like with Jesus". To help you begin to be able to share your faith story, today we are going to get it started. There are three simple prompts that we are going to use today. These prompts are on the back side of your bulletin (*and at the end of this document*). I invite you to turn the back of your bulletin and to get out a writing implement. In learning how to share our faith story, we begin with: "I used to be ____." This is what your life was like before Jesus found you. How would you finish this stem? I used to be selfish, I used to be chasing gratification, I used to be concerned with happiness, I used to be consumed by what others thought of me... What were you before Jesus found you?



The next stem is: "My turning point was ____." This is when Jesus became real, when you committed your life to Jesus. My turning point was when I lost... when I began coming to church each week... when I started serving God and others... when my marriage became about pleasing my spouse... when I finally trusted God. Take a moment to finish this thought. How did Jesus change you?





And lastly, “Now I am _____.” This is how your life is now, with Jesus. Now I am living to share God with others. Now I am seeking to help others find hope and peace. Now I am thinking less of myself. Now I am obedient to God. Take a moment and finish this last stem. Who are you now that Jesus has found you?

When we put these three thoughts together, we have the essence of our faith story. Yes, you do need to flesh it out a bit. For me, my story would go something like this: I used to be selfish and I worried a lot about what others thought of me. My turning point was when I believed and accepted that Jesus loves me no matter what – no matter what I do or don’t do, no matter what. Now I am living to please and obey God first, trying to think more of others and less of myself.

This is a hard process. It forces us to look within, to really consider who we are in Christ and to evaluate our relationship with Him. The process of standing before God, of admitting who and what we are, is hard. It is a refining process. To come before God, to admit our sins, is deeply personal and intimate. It is a time of vulnerability, a time of admitting our weaknesses. This is what we do when we celebrate communion, when we come and kneel before our God and ask for mercy and forgiveness. We are begging for God’s love to wash away our sin and guilt, to make us holy and pure once again in God’s sight. And He does. God loves us so much that He does not let our sin stand in the way of a

relationship with Him. In God's great love, we are transformed, we are made new again. Thanks be to God.



Celebrating Holy Communion...

This act of remembrance is so important to our faith. It is also part of our story. It is God's love and grace and mercy and forgiveness that makes us who we are in Christ. My friends, this is also what we have to offer to others. It is the story of what God has done for us and what God can do for others. This is why our story is such a great gift. Our story of why Jesus matters to us is a gift that we just have to share with others.

At the close of our passage today, Jesus said, "*There is no commandment greater than these*". To love God and to love neighbor – there is no greater command. When we know our story and when we share our story, we are showing others how we love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. When we know our story and when we share our story, we are also showing our neighbors how much we love them. One of the greatest gifts of love that we have is our story. May we each make efforts this week to understand our story, to develop our story, to know our story. May we each be blessed with an opportunity this week to share our story with a neighbor – to share who we were, to share how Jesus changed us, and to share how much Jesus means to us so that another may come to know Jesus. May it be so this week for you and for me. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) How does your story of faith reflect growth in love of God and neighbor?
- 2) No story is too small, too ordinary. Pray over Roz Picardo's question: What would your life be like without Jesus?
- 3) How does your giving – time, talents, gifts, resources – reflect your faith and your love of God and neighbor?

How to Share Your Story:

- 1) I used to be _____.
- 2) My turning point was _____.
- 3) Now I am _____.