

The Greatest (Three) Commandments

Mark 12: 28-34

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he 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.

In confirmation class we are learning about how to interpret scripture faithfully. We all hear a lot of interpretations out there. Some helpful, others toxic. We are realizing that all our differences in beliefs and priorities and how we treat one another, it comes down to how we interpret what the bible says. So in the story we get a question from a reporter who is impressed with how Jesus handles other questions about how he interprets scripture. One being political about paying taxes. The other theological about resurrection. Impressed with Jesus’ response the reporter asks, “Mr. Jesus, for the record, can I get a quote: which commandment is the priority for you?” In other words, what is the interpretive lens through which you answered these questions? And what does Jesus say? “Listen, O Israel. The Lord your God is one. You shall love God with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole mind, and your whole strength. The second is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

We know the commandment well. We’ve heard it many times. We’ve adopted it. We would probably all agree with it as central to our understanding of how we live out our faith. God is one, and we are to live as people created in God’s image as one. And we do this by loving God and our neighbor. But here’s the sticky wicket: loving God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength is a rather abstract concept, isn’t it? We might say we love God by doing God’s will, but doesn’t this hinge on how we interpret God’s will? Those who punch down on others theologically believe they are doing God’s will and say they are loving others by trying to fix them in accordance with God’s will. Or we might say we love God through worship or devotion or acts of service, which is all true, but again to love God with my whole being it’s rather abstract, if not impossible.

Except, there is something that snagged me this week that I have missed before. You see, there are actually three commandments in Jesus’ response. One, love God. Two, love your neighbor as yourself. And the third? It’s right there in the very first word: Listen! Listen O Israel, the Lord your God is one. It got me thinking: what if our love for God begins with listening? And it carries into the second command as well, that loving our neighbor begins with listening to them as well. Listening to their needs. Listening to why they believe what they do. Listening to the

stories that created who they are. What if listening is the key to love? I mean, could we imagine any meaningful relationship without listening?

It's no secret our schools are struggling right now. Our teachers, God bless them, have endured the chaos of returning to in-school learning with little support. They have endured, to put it mildly, our children acting out (some have endured the parents acting out as well). Violence is on the rise. A lack of respect has become the new normal. We contemplate what we can do to solve these issues. And as we know when a child is acting out, underneath they are saying something. When one of the kids comes home from school acting like the Tasmanian devil, on a rampage, giving a bit of talk back, we know something's up. Makes me wonder: what if underneath our children are telling us what the problem is, but we just aren't listening. Instead, we discipline, or suspend, or expel. We sever any chance of restoring the relationship.

It's a microcosm mirroring the behaviors of our greater society. There was an article that came out this week asking if we were heading toward another civil war. We are growing more violent. Our differences are becoming more irreconcilable. We are canceling each other if we disagree or are offended. We simply write each other off and retreat to our echo chamber. I've been on both sides of that. Canceling is what happens when we stop listening to each other. It's as if we are all walking around with cotton swabs in our ears—or ear buds. And I wonder if all of it is happening because we stopped listening. But if it's true that loving God and neighbor begins with listening, well, then we have to confess we aren't loving one other very well right now.

But here's the good news: it's not too late. There was a school in Ohio, who were having issues with students acting unruly. Guns in lockers. Fights in the halls. Anarchy in classrooms. Same stuff that's happening here. So they held a bunch of mandatory circle meetings where the focus was on having the students listen to each other and the adults would listen to what the kids were going through. After holding space for a while the kids started to open up and what they said is heartbreaking. Some said, "I feel like I don't have a future." Others said, "I have nowhere to go after school lets out." Underneath the administration heard that these children felt cancelled. So they took the data from their stories, and they began to form a plan. They did something and as a result the students felt heard. More, they felt loved. I mean, isn't it the same for all of us? Do we not feel loved, when we've been heard? It doesn't mean we will agree with someone else's opinions or behaviors, but we can't afford to keep canceling each other out, because God doesn't cancel anyone, ever.

Here at Trinity, our elders have made a commitment to hold relational meetings. They want to listen to what's going on in your life, and how church fits into that, and what kind of energy you have as we continue our justice work by listening to the needs of our Latino neighbors, our African American neighbors, our LGBTQ neighbors. We are learning that listening builds trust, builds community, and it's a practical way we can show our love for each other.

Someone once said, "The biggest mistake made by humans is that we listen only half, understand only a quarter, but almost always talk double." "Listen, O Israel..." There are three commandments in the story: love God, love neighbor. How do we love God and neighbor? It

begins with listening. It's a tall order these days. But when we do, something begins to happen. And perhaps it is then we discover, we are not that far from the kingdom of God after all.