

“That’s a Tall Order!”
March 22, 2020 (Fourth Lent)
St. Paul’s UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “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.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘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.” When 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.

Well church, we’re closing in on the final days of Jesus’ life. This is where the rubber really meets the road. You may remember – if you were with us in church a few weeks ago, which, granted, feels like three lifetimes ago – you may remember Jesus was asked the question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” The Pharisees and Herodians ask him this, and they do it in order to try to trap him. They’re playing “gotcha” with him.

This week, another religious leader – a scribe – asks Jesus a question, but you get the sense that this guy, unlike the guys two weeks ago, this guy is actually *sincere*. He really wants to know, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

And Jesus replies: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord is 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.’” Jesus could have stopped there. But he doesn’t. He goes on: “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor.’” And then Jesus adds one more, “...as yourself.” Well, the scribe who asked him the question apparently likes this answer – he even repeats it right back to Jesus, along with his own flourishes – and when Jesus sees that the scribe understands what he’s saying, Jesus gives him a nice pat on the back, and tells him he’s not far from the kingdom of God.

...You know, I wish I could be like that scribe! I wish I could hear Jesus tell me I’ve almost made it, that I’m not far from the kingdom of God. But I don’t know if that’s going to happen today. Jesus is giving the scribe, and me, and you, a tall order here. Love God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength? Love my neighbor as myself? Last week, I was thinking those commands sounded easy compared to the apocalyptic stuff Jesus served us up in our last reading... but

you know, I was wrong. Loving neighbor? Loving God? Loving self? On further reflection, I actually think that is hard. Really hard. And I'm not sure I can do it.

First of all, loving God is hard. How do we love someone, or something, we can't even see?

Some of you know that I have a special love for spiritual practices (that's why I love spending time with monks so much!)- practices like contemplative prayer, *lectio divina* (holy scripture reading), or even worship, like this! – whose sole purpose is to help us love God more and more deeply. Which, I think is what Jesus is talking about here: loving God with our whole hearts, minds, souls, and strength. And you know, I love thinking about and teaching this stuff – I love talking about spirituality and spiritual practices – but, if I'm really honest, I have to admit that I don't, well, *practice* nearly as much as I'd like to. My life is too busy; I have too much to do; too many emails and phone calls to return; too many new things to learn like how to host a zoom meeting or a livestream; too many things to plan. Sometimes, I hardly have time to even *think* about God during my days, so *loving* God with all my mind, strength, heart, and soul seems a nearly impossible task.

But God knows us. God knows us so well. And God knows how hard it is to be human.

One of my favorite spiritual fathers, Thomas Merton, prays this very honest prayer:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.”¹

Did you hear that? Even the desire to please God pleases God. Yes, we are far from perfect, and we will never love God perfectly, but even our desire to do so is an important step towards loving God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength.

But it doesn't end there.

Because Jesus goes on, “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” I'm going to first focus on the second part of this command: loving neighbor as *yourself*, which, really, is like a third command, to love ourselves. If, after all, we are to love our neighbor as our own selves, the implication is that we are to... love ourselves.

And that can be so hard.

Most of us, on most days, have a hard time loving ourselves. We are too aware of all the ways we seem *unlovable*. We are not rich enough, or thin enough, or successful enough or smart enough or holy enough or young – or old – enough or thoughtful enough or good enough. We have not become the people we thought we would be by now. We are haunted by regrets, and shame, and

¹ See <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/80913-my-lord-god-i-have-no-idea-where-i-am>.

secret things that we pray no one ever discovers about us. Love *ourselves*? Are you kidding?

Marianne Williamson, a spiritual writer and teacher, has this to say about loving ourselves:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. (...) We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.”²

I love that. I love the idea that maybe, just maybe, the most fundamental reason we’re afraid to start loving ourselves is because, if we do, *we might actually begin to shine*. To radiate, even. But not with ego or narcissism, that’s not what I’m talking about here, but that we’d radiate with *God*, God glowing in and around and through us.

And there’s another thing about this kind of radiating: when we glow like this, it doesn’t shut people down, or turn them off or turn them away; instead, it invites people around us to do the same. I shine, you shine, we all shine together.

You shall love God. You shall love self. And, of course, that leaves us with the last command: “You shall love your neighbor.” These days, that one might seem particularly challenging.

It strikes me that when Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, he doesn’t begin by giving orders like “do such and such, or don’t do such and such.” Instead, he begins this way: “The Lord is our God.” It’s only *then* – after Jesus has made clear that the Lord is our God – that Jesus starts talking about loving God and neighbor and self. In other words, what we are commanded to do is based first – is based entirely and absolutely – in this promise: The Lord is our God.

The Lord is our God. That’s the first thing Jesus says. But what does this mean? The Lord is our God. It means that God has made us in the divine image. It means that God has claimed us as God’s own people – beloved children, every single one of us. Do you hear me? *Every single one of us*.

It’s so easy to complain about how some folks are behaving during this pandemic – the hoarding, the meanness. But church, there are some of us who are acting in such a beautiful and holy way, too... it takes my breath away.

Wes M, one of our members, posted this on Monday, and I haven’t been able to get it out of my mind: “If you are elderly, have a compromised immune system, or there is any other reason you don’t want to go to the grocery store, please message me and I will be more than happy to pick up anything you might need, & deliver it to you.... If the school closures have you concerned about your

² Williamson, Marianne, *A Return to Love* (HarperCollins, New York, 1992).

child not being able to eat breakfast or lunch, let me know. I will do what I can to help. A box of cereal, gallon of milk, bread, pb/j, etc. No judgment!"³

It's easy to see the hoarding, the greed, the fear... and to use that as an excuse to not love our neighbor – yes, even our hoarding neighbor! – the way Jesus calls us to love our neighbor. But I love how Wes calls us to something more: to generosity, to openness, to non-judgment, and yes, mostly to love. At a time such as this, loving our neighbor – and especially to the most vulnerable neighbor – is exactly where Jesus is calling us to be.

And we can start to do that here. Here, in this space that reaches across miles and miles, we are learning to love God, ourselves, and our neighbor. As we gather, even and maybe especially in this virtual space, we discover that there are no strangers here, no enemies. Just family. In this space, we learn to love ourselves and our neighbors, just as God has loved us.

Love God. Love yourself. Love neighbor. It's such a tall order, but we can start here. Together, we can learn to love. Together, we can start to shine, even into the darkest corners of the night.

Thanks be to God.

³ Printed with permission from Wes Mathes' FB post, March 14 at 9:58PM.