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Waterford Mennonite Church
June 23, 2019
VBS Sunday – Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37
Learning to love like Jesus

This past week I had the joy of participating in our Vacation Bible School. Hats off to Pastor Katie, Mikki Bowman, and their crew of leaders who created and provided an enriching and inspiring learning environment for our children! As you have already heard, throughout the week the overall theme was: Who is my neighbor? Learning to love like Jesus. Every morning the children looked at a different biblical passage that helped them learn more about who are their neighbors, and what it might just be like to love like Jesus.

This morning we want to dwell with the biblical passage that the children memorized this week – Mark 12:28-34. This passage in Mark was also the biblical story on Monday during VBS. As we think about the question “Who is my neighbor?” and as we consider the challenge to love like Jesus, then we in fact must begin with Mark chapter twelve. So I invite you turn there with me now.

Our passage begins in verse 28, however, if we look back to earlier in the chapter we see that the chapter is just filled with the religious leaders questioning Jesus. In the broader context of Mark Anabaptist Theologian Timothy Geddert reminds us that

From the start, the religious leaders have opposed Jesus and everything he stands for. They have criticized his contact with sinners, his lax attitude to spiritual disciplines, his inappropriate Sabbath behavior, and his failure to observe cleansing laws. He claims authority in such matters as forgiving sins apart from the sacrificial system, or regulating Sabbath behavior without appealing to rabbinic interpretations. So (back in Mark chapter 3) they initiate the death plot (3:6). (We need to realize that) At stake are their interpretations of the law, their traditions and customs, their rituals and ceremonies. At stake is their own claim

to act as God's representatives. At stake is the support of the people, for without that support, their own influence is gone.¹

So we find Jesus here in chapter 12, surrounded by religious leaders who are just pestering him with questions, trying to catch him in a trap. Now think for just a moment, that you had been one the leaders surrounding Jesus that day. Or better yet, imagine that Jesus joins you today for a cup of coffee, or if you are like me, for a large ice cold diet coke from McDonalds. What question would you ask Jesus? What do you desperately long to know and understand?

As most of you know, my husband Luke and I have the joy of parenting our four children who now range in age from 10 to 4 ½. I get asked lots of questions. Some questions I could imagine I might be asked, while other questions appear to come out of the complete blue. Some questions really make me think. Other questions make me laugh at the absurdity. And yet other questions make me experience sorrow that my kids need to worry about such topics.

I wonder, what did Jesus experience as he was being bombarded with these questions from the religious leaders? In this chapter he is questioned about paying taxes, and then given this absurd, random, unlikely circumstance of 7 brothers each eventually marrying the same women, after the death of the previous brother, and still leaving no heirs. Then they ask, tell me Jesus, at the day of resurrection, who will really be married to that 1 woman? I have to imagine that at least inside Jesus is shaking his head in disgust, maybe even in humor, all the while thinking: "These poor religious leaders. They just don't get it. They have yet to understand what I am about, what the kingdom of God is about. They are creating such farfetched stories and all the while missing the point, missing the mission, missing the vision, missing me."

Our text begins in verse twenty-eight with yet another question to Jesus. "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Ah, it feels like perhaps the religious leaders are catching onto something that is significant, meaningful, and relevant. Jesus responds with these

familiar words: “The most important one is this...” Now I could imagine the religious leaders leaning toward Jesus, highly interested in hearing how he is going to respond to this question. The religious leaders would have been scholars of our Old Testament, which we know is filled with laws and commandments. Lots and lots of do’s and do nots. So even after I have read this text countless times, this week I still found myself holding my breath in anticipation as Jesus answers this question. It is a big question, and the answers provides a foundation.

Jesus says “The most important commandment is this: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy chapter 6 from the passage known as the Shema. This is not just a random passage Jesus quotes. Instead this passage was recited regularly in the synagogue, as well as every morning and evening. This was not some obscure commandment. This was one that they had been instructed to place on their hearts, to tell their children, to talk about at home and as you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. And if that was not enough, these words were to be tied to their hands and bound to their foreheads and written on the doorframes of their houses and their gates. In essence, God’s people have already been told that this commandment is central, is foundational, is in fact the heart of all commandments.

In essence Jesus responds to the religious leader by saying “The center of the law is not some hidden key to be discovered by intricate exegetical maneuvers. The center of the law is the love commands repeated regularly in worship”ⁱⁱ and in your homes. The center of the law? The greatest commandment? Love the Lord your God above all else. Love your Lord your God with all that you are, all that you can be, all that you hope to become. Love God first and foremost. Love God best.

This week as I thought about this dialogue exchange I realized that the religious leader's question to Jesus answered a question I held about the passage from Deuteronomy. When you read the passage in Deuteronomy it is amazing to note the scope of the commandment in terms of when you are to remember it, recite it, share it, and where you are to post it, place it, and mark it. It feels like there is in fact no area of your life, nor anytime in your day, when you should not be holding this commandment front and center.

So as the religious leader asks Jesus this question it suddenly clicked within me that this is why the instructions were so pervasive and extensive in Deuteronomy. First, it is easy to forget. Secondly, it is our human nature to want to forget or not obey this commandment. And thirdly, the other commandments are only possible, are only attainable if we live out the first commandment. And as another scholar has noted, "The greatness of the love commandment lies not in its surpassing value over and against all of the other commandments of Jewish law but, rather, in its ability to *hold up* all the rest."ⁱⁱⁱ

I believe that as Jesus understood our human realities and tendencies, in our text in Mark Jesus goes on to answer the question that wasn't asked. He goes on to say "The second command is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment greater than these."

Here Jesus quotes from Leviticus chapter 19. Again, it is a commandment that would have been very familiar to the religious leaders. It is not new information. Instead Jesus is reminding them what they have already been instructed as some of the foundational building blocks of their faith. First they are to love God, the **only** God, with **all** that they are. Then they are love their neighbors as themselves. I wonder if the religious leaders were actually hoping that Jesus would rewrite the Old Testament law and summarize that the greatest commandment, and

even the second greatest commandment, were in fact easier to live out. You know, maybe something like the greatest commandment is to try your best. Whenever possible be kind. Work hard. Try to think about others at least once a week or once a month. And on Sundays, for sure on Sundays, remember to talk to God in prayer. But, oh no. Jesus says that all that God asks of God's people, is to respond to God's love by loving God, loving others, and loving ourselves.

These commandments naturally lead us to ask 'what is love?' Or, what does this type of love look like? Well, it is an intentional **love in action**. The answer to these questions can be found in looking at the story of Jesus in the gospel of Mark. Just a couple chapters beyond our passage we find Jesus being crucified, dying on the cross for our sins and shame, and rising to new life to offer each of us hope for today and for all of our tomorrows. Loving God with all that he was, and loving his neighbors as himself.

These commandments also ask us to consider then, "Who is our neighbor?" I think that answer could be easily summarized as our neighbor is anyone who has been made in the image of God. Whether living in our home, across the street, across the state, across the world. We are "unequivocally commanded to seek out and to love the divine spark"^{iv} found in all of humanity. But maybe we would want to respond, "Well Jesus, you have obviously never met *my* neighbor! Or what about _____ (fill in the blank)." And to that I would share a quote from a David Sellery, a Christian author, who writes:

God created and Christ died for the least attractive, least accomplished, most annoying neighbor we have... God intimately knows the cast of characters that populate our days. They are (God's) beloved children, too. No less precious to (God) at their most difficult, than we are at our most endearing. We are not asked to approve boorish behavior, haphazard hygiene or a host of bad habits. But we are unequivocally commanded to seek out and to love the divine spark, the image of God impressed on all... Our neighbors are

there to be loved, not to be endured, not to be tolerated, not to be accommodated...but to be actively loved as we love ourselves.^v

This week as I read these words from Sellery I wrote in the margin of my paper: “Ouch. These are accurate words, although extremely difficult words to digest. I find myself wanting to defend my actions or lack of actions, and yet his words, just like Jesus’ are straightforward, honest, and accurate. Do I love God with **all** that I am? Do I love my neighbors with real, raw, and reaching love? I’m not sure that I do... maybe on some of my best days, but clearly not every day. Jesus help me love like you, move me beyond my fears and comfort zones, help me to see the face of God in the other. Bind these words and truths on my heart, on my forehead, on the doorframes of my office and my home. May they flood my soul and dictate my steps, my actions, my thoughts, and my directions. Help me learn to love my God better, and help me learn to love my neighbors with a love that is strong, sure, and one that surpasses my preconceived judgement. I know that on my own I cannot love like this. Help me to embrace your love for me, and help me allow this love to flow through me to others. Help me love like Jesus.”

That my friends continues to be my prayer for this week. What will your prayer be? How are you doing living into and living out these two commandments?

When asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus responded, “The most important one is this: ‘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. The second is this: love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.

Amen.

ⁱ Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Herald Press: Scottsdale, Pennsylvania), 278.

ⁱⁱ Geddert, *Mark*, 290.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amy Linderman Allen, “The Politics of the Greatest Commandment,” <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-the-greatest-commandment-mark-12-28-34/>

^{iv} David S. Sellery, “The Great Lover,” <https://us6.campaign-archive.com/?u=dbffd2070718c7bb6a1b9b7e0&id=31f18153a4&e=9d753c1a09>

^v Sellery, “The Great Lover,” <https://us6.campaign-archive.com/?u=dbffd2070718c7bb6a1b9b7e0&id=31f18153a4&e=9d753c1a09>