

You Are Not Far!

Shepherd's Grace Church

November 4, 2012

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. (Also Read Ruth 1: 1-18)

Context: In worship yesterday, we celebrated by remembering our saints. We recognized those who had passed in the last year, and we remembered all of our loved ones who have shared their faith with us and now rest in eternity! We had excellent attendance. There were many of our youngest members there and their presence reminds us of the awesome responsibility we have to continue to share the faith that has been passed on through the generations!

In the story of Ruth we open with Naomi and her husband Elimelech in the far away land of Moab. They live in the days of the Judges and rather than follow the commands of God to stay in the promised land, they do what is right in their own sight. They travel to a place where they do not belong and there they try to make a living. The famine they experienced in Israel followed them there and they meet with great calamity. Naomi experiences the death of her husband and her two sons as well as continued famine and extreme poverty. At the end of her days in Moab, she is left with her two daughters-in-law and little else. From this position of extreme depravity, she receives word that there is food in her homeland.

Naomi prepares to return to where she belongs but she does not want to force her two daughters to return with her. At her urging, Orpah turns back but Ruth presses on. She recognizes her connection to Naomi is more than just a feeling. It is a commitment. Her heart for her husband commits her to a life-long relationship with her mother-in-law. Ruth 1: 16-17 is one of the most frequently quoted passages in the Bible and as we hear it again today we are reminded that love is more than a feeling. It is a covenant commitment that transcends feelings and invites us to discipline that guides all of our life

decisions! “Where you go,” Ruth says, “I also will go, and there will I lay down. Your people will be my people and Your God will be my God! May the Lord do thus and so to me, and still more if even death parts me from you!”

These powerful words from Ruth remind us that we love not just with the emotions of a moment, not just with feelings of desire, but with a commitment to come together to the place where we belong and to respond to the hard times in our lives as courageously as we respond to the joy filled times. It is important to remember that these words are spoken as the two women head to the place where they belong. In Deuteronomy 12: 5 we are told that we shall seek the place that the Lord shall choose for us. In this place shall we worship and in this place shall we make our offerings. Naomi and her husband forgot these words and left. Now Ruth and Naomi return to the place the Lord chooses for them. God’s commitment to them is revealed in the balance of the Book. Ruth’s commitment is revealed even before she knows how things will turn out. Ruth’s commitment is made from faith! She trusts because she loves and she stays because love is more than just a feeling, it is a commitment in good times and in bad!

The Saints of Shepherd’s Grace meet us at exactly this point! They come to a place of the Lord’s choosing, a place of worship because they also in faith have taught us the foundations of faith! They have brought us to a greater understanding of God’s great love for each of us. We remember them all, but especially in this moment we remember those whom we lost just this past year.

Who among us could forget Ronda Bailey. Her unbridled excitement as she discovers the Lord was and is contagious. The looks of absolute joy on her face as she found Easter eggs we had hidden melt the heart and invite each of us to a new commitment to seek a greater relationship with the Lord!

Many will remember Hazel Wolf and her faithful attendance with her sister. Even though she was not a regular member of our Church, she was where the Lord commanded her to be and her faithfulness lives on as a testament to God’s great love!

Dorothy Poling was one of the founding members of the W.H.O. group. (women helping others) She was indefatigably interested in the growth of our church and in our mission to reach out to others. In her last days when she was unable to attend, she would always call me or one of you to find out exactly what was going on. Her love was not just a feeling, it was and is a commitment to all of us!

Don Balsters was not able to attend Shepherd’s Grace much for worship, but he and I talked about the church extensively. We talked about the financial matters of the church and he was a very faithful giver. Not only would he share his wealth but also his wisdom, and he reminded me on more than one occasion, “you cant borrow your way out of debt.” Don cared and he lived that care!

I remember Amy Blancas coming to church many Sundays when it was clear she didn't feel like being here! You probably also remember her bringing her son Joe. It was clear on many occasions that Joe did not want to be here, but Amy was a witness to her love for Joe and for God and she dedicated her life to sharing her faith with her son.

Then there's Albert Bacastow Sr. Last fall, Albert and I prayed that the Cardinals would make it into the playoffs in major league baseball. I do not know that God answers these kinds of prayers, but the Cardinals won the final game of the season and made the playoffs and went on to win the world series! In November of last year, Albert and I celebrated their victory and he looked forward to another spring, to new life. Earlier this year, Albert rounded third base of this life and headed for home. Now, safe at home, I can imagine him celebrating the faith he so bravely lived out for all of us in his life!

The common thread between these saints and Ruth is the thread of love. Each of these men and women, like Ruth knew love not as a feeling, but as a covenant commitment. In covenant, love gets stronger in the unusual times. It celebrates more keenly our joys and it supports more completely in our struggles! This thread is also what connects our lives to the Gospel passage this morning.

The young scribe who is standing off to the side listening as Jesus debates with the Sadducees hears Jesus as he responds well to their attack. The way Jesus conducts himself even in the face of trickery and trial inspires the young man to ask Jesus a question. "Which is the greatest of the commandments, the young man asks?" Jesus senses his sincerity and gives him an immediate and sincere answer! The greatest commandment is this, "Hear o Israel! The Lord, our God, the Lord is One! You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself!"

The scribe is impressed with his answer and suggests that this way of living is more important even than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices! He acknowledges the wisdom of Jesus' answer and in his own way, is responsible for reducing the whole of law to two commands; love God and love neighbor. At least that is the way most of us want to hear the summary by the scribe. Loving God goes with out saying, and I will discuss that in a moment, but the phrase love neighbor is not complete is it?

It is easy to love neighbor as long as the neighbor looks like me, however that is not all Jesus says. He says we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. (Lev. 19: 12) There is a clever cartoon I discovered as I was preparing for this message this week.



I think the sheep sum it up well. Many of us tend to think the neighbors God has put near us are somehow less desirable than the neighbors other people have. The problem is, I don't read in Mark's account that Jesus gives us a choice. Our neighbors are our neighbors and we are to love them as we love ourselves.

Each week, I am humbled as I see this love exercised in our congregation. You reach out to people who have found themselves in places they were not supposed to be. As a result they are experiencing difficulties many of us could never imagine, yet without judgment you reach out to them. I see them as they come to Shepherd's Table on Thursdays. They are hungry, they wear clothes that are different than yours, they do not have the same habits of cleanliness as you and yet you pour your hearts out to them and you love them. I am confident you learned these lessons from the saints who have gone before. What a blessing to pass the teaching on to those who come after us!

This teaching is so critical I believe it is the very heart of the Gospel! In Jesus' day, there were two great rabbis. One was named Shamaei, the other Gamamel. One day, a man approached Shamaei and said, "I will convert to Judaism if you can teach me the whole of Torah while I stand on one foot. (here you must imagine me standing on one foot as I tell the story.) Shamaei dismissed the man saying it was impossible to learn the whole of Torah in such a short time. The man then approached Gamamel. He asked him to do the same. Gamamel instructed him to stand on one foot and then said to him, "you have heard it said that you should do to your neighbor as you would have done to yourself." This statement sums up the whole of Torah, the rest is commentary. Go now and study it!

Love of neighbor as we love ourselves is essential to our faith as Christians. This love has been handed down to us by those who have gone before us and now we stand on it, not on one foot, but on two, even as we stand on the shoulders of the giants of our faith. We must live it so that future generations will stand on the shoulders of all we have taught them. In this way, the Kingdom of God comes near! In this way we are not far from that Kingdom! We cannot choose the neighbors, we can only choose the love!

I know this is true because it is in this way that God loves us! None of us is worthy of his love or grace, yet he loves us enough to pour out that love in such abundance that we cannot begin to imagine. He

loves us enough to give his only son for our salvation. (John 3: 16) The only way we can respond to this great love is to hear the words Jesus utters this morning and comply. Hear O Israel! Listen! Pay attention! This is BIG!! God is God alone! There is no other God! Love Him with all your heart!

In the first century, if Jesus had stopped there it would have probably been sufficient. It was understood in Biblical times that the heart was an instrument not only of feelings, but of commitment. Getting to the heart of a matter was not just describing how one felt, but of being committed to gaining understanding and seeing through. In the 21st century, we have reduced the heart to feelings and emotions only. Jesus wants us to reclaim the fullest of intentions of our heart! He wants us to know the depth of love that is written on every page of the Bible! Here are just a few references:

- Trust in the Lord with all your heart.
- Blessed are the pure in heart.
- Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.
- I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds ([Ps 9:1](#)).
- God knows the secrets of the heart ([Ps 44:21](#)).
- My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever ([Ps 73:26](#)).
- Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart ([Deut 6:4-5](#)).
- You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead ([Deut 11:18](#)).

In the last reference we are to bind these words on our hands and our heads as a commitment! This is the commitment of our saints, this is the love they know, this is the love they want us to learn! This is the love that is revealed to the young scribe and as he puts it together he begins to understand that this love is more important than any offering or sacrifice we could ever make. It is this love that allows God to send his Son! It is this love that allows us to serve! It is this love that allows us to worship! This love causes us to fall on our knees and give thanks to God and then to respond because we can do nothing less. Our only response can be an equivalent response as we go out with the commitment of covenant for our neighbor!

When Jesus hears the response of the scribe, he knows the scribe understands. Who would have thought it would be a scribe, one of the class who attacks Jesus at every opportunity, who would have thought it would be one of these who recognize the fullness of Jesus' ministry? Who would have thought this man would have been his neighbor...but Jesus loves him and loves his response. The man's question after all is almost identical to the question asked by the rich man in chapter 10. "What must I

do to inherit eternal life.” Unlike that man however, there is no sense of entitlement or expectation on the part of this man. He asks openly, genuinely seeking that which is missing from his life.

In Jesus’ response to the man however there is a message to us. Jesus says, “you are not far from the Kingdom of God.” What is the message you ask? Look at Mark 1: 15. The message is repent for the Kingdom of God has come near! The young man is not far, but there is one more thing that is required! He must repent, turn from his previous suspicions and conditions for God and Love God with his whole heart!

That is what is required of us also! We must remember the lessons of our saints. We must learn from those lessons of unconditional love. We must remember the lessons of Ruth and her fierce commitment to a covenant she has made and we must repent. We must turn from the casual and cavalier approach we have to love and we must learn the radical love God is calling us to! Love with our whole heart means loving regardless of situation or circumstance. Love with our whole heart means loving in good times and in bad. Love with our whole heart invites us to come together as a community in a place not of our choosing but of the Lord’s to offer not our burnt offerings and sacrifices but ourselves.

There is a pastor of a congregation in Dallas who says that every week as she prepares her sermon, she realizes there are three kinds of people in the congregation. There are the bleeding. These are the ones who have recently suffered injury, perhaps cancer has returned or a family member has been injured or a spouse has decided to leave. They are coming wanting bandages for their wounds. They want a god who will care for them right now.

There are the bewildered. These are the ones who attended church as children and young adults but drifted away and have now returned. They are familiar with the language. They have heard of resurrection and salvation but they are not sure what these terms mean to them. They are searching for something more in their lives. They want a god who will give them answers to the void in their lives.

There are the been-there’s. These are the ones who have been around and have seen it all. They feel somewhat insecure in the presence of great faith and they continue to try to prove themselves. There is the 80 year old who is still concerned about the comment made in Bible Study last week and whether they may have overstepped their authority. There is the young person so filled with guilt that they wonder if the church, their family and their friends might not be better off without them. They just want to live out their lives in quiet desperation and they come to church to hedge their bets. If there is an eternity, they want to be on the right side of the after life.

I believe however, that there is a fourth group in our congregations. These are the believers. They come knowing that love of God is a commitment, a covenant to be strived for in good times and in bad. They let this love spill over into their relationships with others and they share their lives freely,

recognizing that all life is a gift from God! These believers are our saints. You are our saints if you are willing to repent of your doubt and grab on to God's great love that has been shared with us through the generations. This is what it means to Love God with all your heart! You are not far!

Amen!

Next Week: Scripture: Mark 12: 38-44. Message: *Risk/Reward*. This week we meet a widow at the temple. You know the story. She puts in all she has as she makes her offering! The Old Testament laws only require that she put in ten percent. What was she expecting? When you come to worship, what do you expect? When you have the opportunity to share what do you expect? What does God expect? Are they the same? Come and Worship! Come and see!