

March 10 2024 Bishop Amy Odgren Sermon for Knife River 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.

Dear hearers of God's word, grace, peace, and mercy are yours through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

What a joy to be with you this morning. I'm happy to be a part of the rotation of worship leaders who are filling in as you give your pastor the gift of having a sabbatical. You are to be commended for that gift – pastors, deacons and your synod staff take note of such loving, caring congregations who are aware of and encourage your pastor's wellbeing. You will benefit as a congregation when Pastor Susan returns refreshed and renewed. Thank you for this gift – and thank you for the invitation to be with you today. I've served in this synod for nearly 8 years now – the last 4 as your synod bishop, I have not had the opportunity to worship with you – so this is especially a joy to be with you today.

When I worship with one of our synod's congregations, I always want lift up and give thanks for the ministry which we share. You, faithful followers of Jesus here at Knife River, are a part of a larger network of congregations who do the work that we have all been called to do in our synod and beyond.

Through your generous and benevolent gifts, we do ministry together that no one congregation could ever do on their own. You are a part of Lutheran Campus Ministry – the Twin Ports Seafarers ministry – Lutheran Advocacy Minnesota – Together Here – the Eco-Faith Network – and ministry of 3 companion synods, just to name a few. Now I also know that you are a great supporter of Lutheran World Hunger (I think that you have won our synod's Holy Cow Award for several years running) – and your benevolent dollars also support our Lutheran colleges, universities, and seminaries. You support Lutheran Disaster Response – missionaries across the globe – and funding for new and renewing ministries within 65 synods in the ELCA. You do this, Knife River Lutheran Church, and so much more! So, I would like to extend my heartfelt thank you to you for your loving and caring and generous hearts. Thank you for the partnership we share in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And thank you for shining the light of Christ in this community and well beyond. You are beacons of hope to this weary world.

Well – I also came to provide you a message on our gospel story today, so let's turn to the twelfth chapter of Mark.

As usual, Mark gives us something quite unique in his recounting of the confrontation between Jesus and a "scribe," more fully understood as a teacher of the law, one who expounds the meanings of the Torah for the Jewish community. Notice that our gospel story starts with an inference of a dispute that had happened previously. Mark sets the dialogue between Jesus and the scribe in the context of a spirited interaction between Jesus and the Sadducees. The dispute was concerning the proper interpretation of what happens to a childless widow who marries seven brothers in succession in fulfillment of the command for Levirate marriage. Their example to Jesus was exaggerated to make the point; in the resurrection: "whose wife will she be," they ask? Of course, Mark reminds us that the Sadducees do not even believe in any resurrection (Mark 12:18), so their question is obviously a bogus one, designed to trap Jesus in some reply that they may then ridicule.

His answer to them rebukes their question directly by claiming that there will be no marriages in the resurrection since all will become angels of God. That entire dialogue appears to be fruitless, and Jesus concludes it by saying to them, "you are totally wrong" (Mark 12:27)! With that rebuke ringing in the air, the scribe, most likely a Pharisee, in our story for today, comes up to Jesus.

Mark first notes that the scribe observes "how well Jesus answered the Sadducees," probably fully agreeing with Jesus's rebuke of his far more conservative Jewish brothers. The Sadducees were fanatical with the keeping of the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible. If something was not mentioned or implied in the Pentateuch, it had no reality for them, hence their rejection of any belief in resurrection or after life. They were more interested in looking over the 613 laws, 365 prohibitions and 248 positive commands, that formed the basis for Jewish community life together.

Our scribe asks Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of them all," with the possible implication that he is asking which one is most important. For first-century Jews, such a question might nearly blasphemous, since all the laws were seen as equally important. But in reply, Jesus quotes the most famous Jewish claim, the *Shema* from Deut.6:4, a phrase recited daily by all pious Jews then and now. The entire law may be understood as the national response to God's call of Israel to be the chosen people. "Here, O Israel, the Lord your God is one."

Jesus continues with the familiar words from Deut. 6:5: "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 scribe would surely be pleased by this reply since it lies at the very center of Jewish belief and practice.

No Jew would find fault with such an answer. And though Jesus is asked for only one, he offers a second: "You are to love your neighbor as yourself," here quoting Leviticus 19:18. "There is no greater commandment than these," Jesus concludes, and the scribe could only smile with satisfaction; Jesus is an excellent Jewish teacher! The faith and ethics of the Hebrew Bible are inextricably bound together; the command to love God arises directly from the command to love neighbor and vice versa. The love of God is finally empty unless it is fulfilled in the love of neighbor. I'll say it again - **The love of God is empty unless it is fulfilled in the love of neighbor.**

Many early Christians found in Jesus's words a basis for minimizing the ongoing impact of the myriad of Jewish laws. Certainly, the Apostle Paul's constant claims that the Jewish law had in certain respects been "overcome" by the death and resurrection of Jesus, would have been important, as the gospel was preached to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul's famous announcement that anyone "who loves the neighbor has fulfilled the law" (Rom.13:8) was taken as great news by some early believers who desired a freedom from the shackles of the traditional Jewish law.

Then the scribe summarizes what he has heard from Jesus first by repeating what Jesus has said and then adding that "to love one's neighbor as oneself is greater than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices put together" (Mark 12:33).

Once again, this may be heard in two ways: love surpasses all sacrifices, and behavior and attitude are far more crucial for the believer than any act of worship. For the early church, finding its own way in the world apart from its Jewish roots, this statement by the scribe would have been welcome proof that the important demands of God were not found in temple worship and sacrifice **but in the love of God, especially as that was demonstrated by love of neighbor.**

This clearly implies that the two great commandments are in the end all one needs to know to fulfill the call of God. I'm not suggesting that this is at all easy or comfortable; suffering and giving of self and giving up control, and having our world view expanded are elements of that love that cannot be avoided.

This debate in the 2000-year old gospel of Mark remains current in 21st century faith communities. Does the command to love God and neighbor imply that all other commands and laws are of secondary significance for the contemporary Christian believer?

Oh, believe you me – we love to argue this point, individually and institutionally as a denomination, right along with other denominations too. Who does this gospel message of love include – are there other laws that take precedence over the message of Love God and Love Neighbor? Just who is the neighbor? What about character – what about people who live in ways that I don't necessarily like? What about people I have trouble loving? People I disagree with – people who are very different from me? What do I do about all of that?

I believe that the gospel of Jesus does not exclude anyone, and that love is in fact the whole summary of the law of God. Mark's scene has been played out over and over again through the ages and finds its contemporary echo in numerous modern faith communities. We want this gospel of love to include us – envelope us – be for us. And it is.

But if our gospel proclamations are not true for the most marginalized among us—poor folks, single parents, unemployed people, immigrants, refugees, unwed parents, people on public assistance people with disabilities, women, Black, Indigenous and People of Color, LGBTQIA folks—then our gospel cannot be true.

Our story in Mark comes at the end of a series of confrontational challenges, but we get a picture from this exchange of a Jesus who was challenging a system. A system that was more focused on keeping multiple layers of the law and pushing people to the margins rather than living in the abundance of the love of God before them in Christ Jesus. So how shall all of us live in faithful response? We turn to scripture:

"With what shall I come before the LORD

and bow down before the exalted God?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,

with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,

with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?

Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,

the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:6-8)

May we find strength, and courage as we try and live into this Greatest of All Commandments. By loving God and loving neighbor, you are very close to discovering just what it is that God has called you to do. And we journey together in this call.

Amen