**November 4, 2018**

**Mark 12:28-34**

This encounter is like the leaders of two opposing political parties having a conversation about their most controversial policy just in front of a bank of reporters. The people around them were curious about what they had to say to each other, and likely hopeful for some verbal fireworks. The Sadducees had just been reprimanded by Jesus, and *they* likely hoped that this scribe would put Jesus in his place. Other Pharisees, temple elders, and disciples were also in the crowd, all ears to hear what heresy or righteousness would come forth. But the build-up was all for naught… In their brief exchange, Jesus and the scribe agreed on the teaching and practice of the law. --- Nothing to see here. Everyone could go home.

It was rather surprising that after chapters and chapters of the disciples not understanding or learning from Jesus, the one who finally “gets it” was the scribe – one of the people who was purportedly working in opposition to Jesus. Even though the scribe’s question was probably a theological test, and even though it would take a lot for most rivals to compliment the other, both Jesus and the scribe heard truth and righteousness in the other’s answers. Jesus even said that the scribe was “not far from the kingdom of God;” that’s a lot better than the disciples fared in their own questions and answers.

Unfortunately, the grace which Jesus and the scribe offered one another is uncommon amongst today’s rivals. Our country has fallen to constant bickering and deep division. Political party leaders regularly berate and yell and pick on one another. Neighbors are entrenching and building taller fences. We have set up camps around ourselves, ready to sound the alarms and point fingers or weapons if anyone dares to *even think about* crossing the division lines. It’s exhausting. I’m tired of listening to people who just don’t seem to “get it.” I’m tired of reading about mass violence events in our country. I’m tired of thinking, “How can this happen again?”

Last Saturday 11 Jewish citizens of Pittsburgh were killed in their house of worship, then buried by a traumatized and grieving community, while the gunman himself survived and was treated by members of this same community. The gunman was still yelling, “I want to kill all the Jews,” as he was carried into the hospital for treatment. At least 3 Jewish doctors and nurses tended to his body while he screamed such hateful ideologies. In light of our country’s divisions right now, considering the terror this man brought to a people long tormented, many people expected (and may have even wanted) the victims to cry for vengeance. But that is not what the Pittsburgh Jewish community promoted. Instead of lashing out at the gunman or refusing him medical care, the hospital president (who also happened to be Jewish) said that the gunman had been misled by the “noise” he heard in the world. So, “It’s time for leaders to lead. The words [they say] mean things. And the words are leading people to do things like this.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

Words mean things. Words lead people to *think* things and do things. Words matter.

Last week in a small town in Idaho, 14 public elementary school teachers put together a group Halloween costume. Half of them dressed as stereotypical Mexicans – carrying maracas, wearing brightly colored ponchos and sombreros and fake black mustaches. The other half of the group wore sections of a cardboard wall emblazoned with the words, “Make America Great Again.” So the group together built a border wall to keep Mexican people out of this “great” America. … The Latinx students in their classrooms saw their family and culture belittled in this thoughtless Halloween stunt, creating further division not only in their classrooms and schools (purportedly “safe” places), but also further division in their town. As Lt. Cable sang in South Pacific, “You have to be taught to hate and fear… You’ve got to be taught before it’s too late, before you are six or seven or either, to hate all the people your relatives hate, you’ve got to be carefully taught.” Only too late have those teachers realized that they are teaching in more than their planned lessons. Their words mean things. Words lead people – their students – to *think* things and do things. Words matter.

Last year Sweet Hollow spent an entire month recognizing the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, but this year we passed over it. Reformation Day (which also happens to be Halloween) tends to be a political day for religious tribalism. And this year, we didn’t need more reasons to dig down or build up. We didn’t need more reasons to keep our neighbors out or away – even for a day. Words mean things. Words matter. Our words lead our members and visitors to think things and do things. So last week we skipped Reformation remembrances and used our words to celebrate All Saints Day instead. We remembered the many people who have died and now live together with God in eternity. We remembered the great feast Christ promises us, when people will come from north and south and east and west (neighbors and strangers alike) and feast together at God’s Table. Which will be the miracle of all miracles based on the way the world turns these days…

A dirty rumor began to spread around the world thousands of years ago. People whispered that we should stay away from those *other* people. They whispered that the *other* people are dirty, that they are stupid and mean and less than *we* are. This rumor has led to thousands of unhappy years on earth, countless unhappy families, unworthy world leaders and unnecessary deaths in their personal wars. This rumor led to Christians looking down on Jewish people, thinking that *we* are closer to salvation, or that *we* usurped *them* as God’s chosen people. This rumor led to white people looking down on black people, and Americans looking down on Mexicans. Above all, this rumor led to people thinking first and foremost of themselves, and lastly or rarely of other people.

When Jesus was asked about the most important commandments, he told the scribe that first, disciples should love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. Second, he said that disciples should love their neighbor as themselves.

While loving God is undoubtedly the most important commandment, I think it is the easier of the two. People willingly love God, our Creator and Redeemer, our Almighty and Sovereign Ruler and Savior. But it is much more difficult to love other people – within or beyond our tribe. It is perhaps even more difficult to love *ourselves*, for we know things about ourselves that no one else does. We know the scary thoughts that trip across our mind at night. We know the hurt our hearts harbor. We know the unspeakable things the strength of our anger can think and do and say.

Sue Klebold, parent of one of the student gunmen at Columbine High School, thought she was teaching her son, Dylan, about love and faith, but then she read his diary after he died. She read how he was in agony, suicidal, and cutting himself. She said in a 2017 TedTalk that “I’ve come to believe that his involvement in the shootings was rooted not in his desire to kill, but in his desire to die.” She believes that Dylan’s lack of self-love and self-respect was responsible for his inability to love neighbor and stranger.

If Jesus said that we must love our neighbor as ourselves, it is critical that we first be able to love ourselves. We must find the love with which God seeded our life. We must find the ways that we delight God before we can understand how anyone else is delightful or loveable. Our own faces and skin and thoughts and fears and joys are better known to us than anyone else will ever be. If we do not practice loving ourselves, warts and all, it will be near impossible to love others whom we will never fully see or understand. And if we do not practice loving ourselves, if we do not practice loving our neighbor, it will be near impossible to teach our children to do so. We cannot preach what we do not practice.

When God makes covenants with Abraham and Isaac and Hagar and Jacob, God promises to be with them and their children from generation to generation to generation to generation. And Abraham and Isaac and Jacob all promise to teach their children about God and God’s covenant. God’s covenant has always been rooted in 1) love of God and 2) love of neighbor. All the commandments, all the teachings, all the scripture boils down to these to practices. It should be so simple… and yet… all generations have failed to teach and live into God’s covenant. While some people are intentional in steeping their children in hateful and isolationist ideologies (like the Westboro Baptist Church whose children regularly hold hate signs at protests), most of us unintentionally fail at loving ourselves and our neighbors. But just for a second, imagine what the world would be like if everyone 1) loved God and 2) loved their neighbor. Just for a second… imagine that our every moment is so focused on loving God that we live in a perpetual haze of love and glory. Imagine that this haze of love and glory demands that everyone be truly welcomed everywhere, to marry anyone, to trust everyone… There is no racism or sexism or hate or poverty… Imagine that teachers would teach love and kindness in their actions and beings… Imagine that schools would actually be safe places… If you can imagine this, then you are not far from the kingdom of God.

We are not yet eternal citizens in God’s kingdom, but we can imagine it. We can hope for it. And we can do our part to bring glimpses of the kingdom to earth. For Jesus didn’t tell the scribe to “think about loving God” or to think about loving your neighbor as yourself. Jesus gave an action commandment: Love God. Love neighbor. Love yourself. Do it. Don’t just think about it or talk about it. Do it.

One way that you can love yourself and your neighbor this week is to vote. This is an easy way for American Christians to imagine God’s kingdom into being in our country. Love yourself by believing that you matter and your vote counts. Love your neighbor by electing a leader who will create and maintain policies that actually do care for the widow and refugee, the poor and grieving. Your words (*their* words!) mean things. Words lead people to *think* things and do things. As Dumbledore said to Harry Potter: “It’s not our abilities that make us who we are; it is our choices.” Take advantage of the freedom you are given. Take advantage of the choices you have. Put your faith into action. Go and do this week. Go and love. Amen.

1. Rosenberg, Eli. “The Washington Post.” October 30, 2018. ‘I’m Dr. Cohen’: The Powerful Humanity of the Jewish Hospital Staff that Treated Robert Bowers.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)