

God and the Commandments Come Down to This— LOVE!!
based on Mark 12:28-34, David Jahnke, 9/27/15

Let me bring everyone up to speed in the gospel of Mark. Jesus enters Jerusalem and overturns the tables of the money-changers and salesmen at the temple. Chief priests, lawyers and elders ask him where his authority comes from. He would not answer because they would not acknowledge John the Baptist's authority.

Loyalists to King Herod ask him about paying taxes to Caesar and he suggests that Caesar is in their pocket and they in his; and that anyways, he belongs to God, just as they do. Powerful Sadducees mock the idea of the resurrection which they know he believes in and Jesus corrects them.

So one group of leaders after another was seeking to defeat Jesus' Kingdom mission. And people today still are. But Jesus' answer regarding the resurrection impresses one of the lawyers. And this was not the only leader Jesus impressed. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were on the Jerusalem high council and became followers of Jesus. Jesus also sat and ate and discussed matters with prominent Pharisees. So Jesus' ministry of love was to the powerful as well. He wanted to change their hearts as much as the sinners he ate with and taught.

At our presbytery meeting the other night, we were discussing whether to support an overture to our General Assembly about divesting from fossil fuels due to global warming and pollution etc. An elder who has worked for 35 years for Phillips 66 got up and spoke to how he did not have an answer to these big questions but he knew one thing-- that the key to change was education; that any of the refineries would be glad to provide a tour to the presbytery and explain how the system was entirely closed. He also admitted there were some dirty companies out there but that what it really comes down to is educating the consumer so that they can choose to make more sacrifices; because it is the amount of oil and gas we burn in our homes and cars that have the biggest impact. And her reminded us how utterly dependent upon fossil fuels we are. Our clothes, computers, toys, even solar panels!...anything made with plastics is rooted in oil or natural gas. It was a powerful and persuasive speech to which someone added, "Divesting from these companies would actually mean being excluded from the table where we might have the most influence on company policy."

Love calls us to sit down both with people who have great power and those who have little—with mostly good people and bad people-- acknowledging the good and the bad that we all have a hand in and talking about the sacrifices we all need to make in order to make things better. Of course the more time, talents or treasures we have, the more sacrifices will be necessary.

Jesus told the lawyer that there was nothing more important than loving God above everything else, with all that we are, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. And we learn the sacrifice demanded by love when somebody asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” He told the parable of the Good Samaritan. And the point was anyone who crosses our path and is in need of help is our neighbor whom we are called to help. And in today’s global world, news of neighbors near and far in need and our ability to help is at our fingertips every day.

But how can we provide them with the help they need? This is another example of the seeming impossibility of Jesus’ standards. Well with God, all things are possible; but only by way of a growing Love for God and God’s Way above all things. And the power of communities and a nation committed to them.

I shared a video with you about how the most important question to always be asking and considering is Why? The presenter said Martin Luther King had a huge impact because he was always invoking people to consider why... Why justice? Why love? Why peace? Dr. King was burrowing down into our souls to bring to life the deepest reason that we all know to be true; that is, because there is a moral authority above and beyond all earthly authorities which is calling us to conform our lives and world to His way of justice, peace and love. As the presenter said, “Dr. King did not have a plan. He had a dream.”

The world tells you that death wins. God tells you that Life wins. The world tells you to gain as much as possible to secure and protect yourself and your genepool. God says give everything you have to those in need, trusting in my protection and security. The world says that they are not worthy for all kinds of reasons. God says they are my children, created and redeemed by me and as worthy of my blessings as anyone.

I got to thinking about Jesus affirming the lawyer’s response that costly love is more important than anything; even more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices. Sacrifices atoned for sins and made things right between God and His people. This was the pinnacle of worshipping God, similar to confession and the offering of ourselves and our gifts as we commune with God in worship.

We modern-day priests really love worship. It pains me to hear there is something more basic than confession and communion and other rituals. Come on God... isn't this thing that I am in charge of the most important thing we do every week? I guess not...

But I am not sure that is good news for you. Because what's more important is the thing you are in charge of... every day; that is how much you love others. Knowing this and living it out is the key to the Kingdom of God, according to Jesus' words to the lawyer.

How fitting that this is the message the week that the People's Pope Francis - champion of the poor and reformer of the magisterium in Rome, is in our country. He is right to call the Western world to a deeper care for the world's poor.

I have been reading a wonderful book by a Lutheran pastor named Richard Lischer. It is about his relationship with his son Adam who was diagnosed with cancer sometime after getting married in his late 20s. He went into remission and things were looking bright. His wife became pregnant and then he heard that the cancer was back. And the news kept getting worse and worse. Reading now:

“For some time [my son, daughter-in-law, wife and I] had been attending to sermons in a new way. We listened for the word of God the way a dog on the back of a pickup truck flattens its ears and leans into the wind; we responded to the sermon's theme as if it were chosen with our family in mind... We absorbed the nuances of the spoken word, the imagery of each hymn, and the liturgy's every move, as if the entire package constituted a single promise to us. We were worshipping as if our lives depended on it.” [Stations of the Heart, Parting with a Son, Richard Lischer, kindle location 2047]

This is how we should worship...and how we should live—with an understanding that our lives depend upon it. Because they do...we depend, every moment of every day, upon the Love at the center of all life. And whether we truly live and whether we live eternally depends on Love-- God's love first and foremost but also ours.

And worship is the place we hear this news over and over again and practice loving God above all things and our neighbors as ourselves-- the hospitality involved, the forgiving seventy times seven times, the offering of ourselves, the shared time, space, spiritual gifts and treasures uniting us here. But never forget that the point of all of it is that it gradually spill into our daily lives and neighborhoods and workplaces.

At the presbytery meeting the other night, the worship and business was all inter-mingled. It was at Judith's church at Woodbridge and the poor music director who is retiring; he had to stay for the entire 5 hour meeting because we had hymns interspersed throughout the meeting.

But it was a beautiful reminder that all of worship is work—it is hard to love God and our neighbors. And all of our work is meant to be worshipful. It is where our gifts primarily come alive to bless others! So whether here or out there or in our homes, it's always about love.

Rev. Lischer's son Adam decided to go buy birthday presents for his unborn daughter for the next 18 years. And the first would be a dollhouse made by their priest, Tom. Quoting the book now:

Father Tom asks his [dollhouse] clients to supply a Bible verse for the underside of [his houses.] [My wife and I] saw this on [our granddaughter's] dollhouse not too long ago, furrowed into the wood in Adam's own hand, like a lover's initials carved on a tree: "Peace be to this house." —Luke 10:5 Love, Daddy

With the dollhouse, as with the other birthday gifts, Adam is putting his shoulder hard against the door separating time from eternity. He himself already has one foot in eternity, but this child will be a creature of her own generation. She will know and say things we can't imagine, and face challenges we don't want to imagine. It will be years before she becomes fascinated with her father and pounds her fists against the same locked door [that separates time from eternity.]

Love, Daddy. With that, the door gives a little, almost cracks. You can feel the elemental power of love testing its own limits. Adam was able to love his unborn daughter and not merely an idea of her, just as we are still capable of loving him and not just a memory of him.

When it comes right down to it, Love and Life are all that matter. When your son is dying of cancer right in front of you; when it seems you will never meet your unborn daughter, all you have is the power of love and the hope of life. And while we cannot experience the fullness of Love and Life on this side of the door, Love on that side keeps tapping. And when things become critical for us—when things literally become life and death-- our Love pounds and pounds. And on occasion, the door cracks. And we really love unborn generations and want to give gifts of life to them—most especially the knowledge that their father and grandfather and mother and grandmother and untold millions loved them and love them still.

May this vision and this ultimate reality touch us more and more so that we are driven to make it a reality now— learning to love and care for all of our neighbors just as we do for our own families. This is Christ's call and mission. And he is the one who can do far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine so to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forevermore. And God's people say...

