



Day 2 | Friday, March 8, 2024
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In Mark chapter 12 verse 28, we are told that Jesus is approached by a scribe with the question: which is the first of all commandments. I say approached because this scribe was unlike the other leaders and scholars who came to Jesus throughout Mark chapters 11 and 12 with the intentions of interrogating Jesus and hoping to trap him or catch him in a lie with their line of questioning. We know from verse 28 that this scribe was observing Jesus, was impressed by his previous answers and posed a question to him with genuine openness and curiosity. His question was not an uncommon question for debate and examination amongst scribes at this time. Within the Jewish tradition there are 613 commandments that delineate which actions to positively engage in and which to avoid to have greater union with God.

Now, when Jesus responds to the question about which commandment is first, or greatest, his answer evokes language that would be familiar to and resonate with the scribe. Jesus' answer refers directly to the Shema found in Deuteronomy 6, which is foundational to Jewish faith:

Hear, O Israel!
The Lord our God is Lord alone!
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul,

*with all your mind,
and with all your strength.*

This call from God to love with all your heart, soul, mind and strength is an invitation to greater intimacy and union with God. But, more importantly it is an appeal not to love a God that is stranger to the Israelites, but one who is named Yahweh and created their heart, mind and soul, delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and formed covenant with them. This is a personal God who calls them Beloved asking, “please return your affections to me by orienting all the interior of your being towards me. I have known you, created you, walked with you and I still desire you.”

Jesus follows his answer about the greatest commandment with the second being to love your neighbor as yourself. Once you have oriented your entire being towards God, then you must direct your love towards your neighbor. The scribe affirms and reiterates Jesus’ response saying, “Well said, teacher, you are right.” Jesus, seeing the scribe's understanding, responds to him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

Jesus’ response to the scribe is somewhat strange and in all honesty if I were the scribe I would feel disappointed by it. In my own self-righteousness I would think, “I came to you with good intentions unlike the rest. I gave you an opportunity to reveal your nature and I affirmed your rightness. Yet, I am still not part of the Kingdom of God! How can this be?” I think we can gain insight into Jesus’ response through the author of the text’s keen use of the word “understanding.” Verse 34 reads, “And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the Kingdom of God.’” The Greek word for understanding emphasizes reliance on the intellect, which for the Greek’s exists in the mind. One could argue to understand is not the same as to love. It is not a coincidence that the Shema begins with love God with all your heart and then proceeds to include the other aspects of the internal life, placing emphasis on the importance of the heart first.

When I hear the commandments to love God and then neighbor, I think to myself, “wow, how easy to profess and yet much more challenging to live out.” It is not hard to find signs of the challenges of living out these two great commandments. We live in a city that prides itself not only on its secularism, but also its atheism. Not only does our community no longer direct our affections towards God, but it believes it no longer needs God. In a world where poverty and war runs rampant, it feels safe to say that we have forgotten how to love our neighbor. My guess as to why love is so hard is

because much like the scribe we never move beyond our intellect to feeling, seeing and delighting within our hearts.

Dropping down into our hearts and committing to love often times feels like an immense risk. When I think of the greatest barrier to sinking into the depths of my heart, I find myself ruminating on fear. This is not fear as in reverence or respect. It is a fear associated with a broken heart. I am reminded of a younger version of myself that once professed, “there could not be a God out there who loves me or knows me, why would I waste any more time trying to be in relationship with it?” This statement was informed by a loss I had experienced very early in life that shaped my whole identity, but mostly left me confused, experiencing and witnessing grief constantly, and so disappointed in the one who was supposed to call me Beloved. I never wanted to feel that level of pain again and so instead I closed off my heart and let my intellect be my primary operating system. In an effort to protect me, my intellect took all of my experiences of and in the world, created meaning about them, and projected that meaning not only onto God but my neighbor. God was no longer Creator and Lover, but the one who takes and abandons. This God is far away and punishes. My neighbor is someone not to love because they are finite and can be gone in an instant. I think projecting earthly experiences on to God is fairly common. Maybe someone calls us a hurtful name and we begin to remove the crown of Beloved and replace it with this new inaccurate title. Or we experience oppression and we start to wonder where and who God is to us in the midst of our suffering.

While in the short term these projections feel safe, in the long term I think we become disoriented and harmed – the greatest harm is that we begin to forget ourselves as called Beloved and God as home. As Augustine so eloquently professed, “You have made us for yourself O lord and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Our heart, soul and mind were created by, belong to and long for God. So, how do we move from the intellect into the heart and a greater sense of in-love-ness with God? I often hear people say that love and fear cannot exist at the same time. I don’t know that I agree with this sentiment. Rather than trying to overcome or move beyond fear, I think we best love God when we acknowledge the fear, surrender it to God and choose to love. I had a spiritual director that walked me through this process of surrendering my fears to God and what I found on the other side was that while I continued to ignore and try and run from God. God in fact did not abandon me. God was right there beside me the whole time, weeping with me, hands open ready to carry the fear and the heart break, and smiling in awe of all that I am. As I re-oriented my heart, mind and soul towards God in

love, I saw the face of God and They said to me, “Hi, I have been waiting for you. I have known you and loved you for so long, let me show you who you are to me, my sweet Beloved child.” And this is the good news that no matter how broken our heart and unable we are to offer perfect love to God, God is steadfast in Their love for us.