

So, today's sermon topic is a little tricky.

I was asked to preach on Jesus commandments to love God above all else and to love thy neighbor as thyself, which is why I chose today's passage from the book of Mark.

His instructions for his disciples to do this exist in one form or another in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but in a bit you'll see why I chose the Markan passage.

The problem is that the person, who made this sermon request, also asked me to preach on Jesus and the Philistines, in conversation with this passage.

Now, I am not aware of Jesus ever interacting with the Philistines because they lived hundreds of years before he did.

So, I am going to surmise that the person mean to write Pharisees instead of Philistines, but the sermon request was anonymous, so I can't confirm that, I just made my best guess.

Now, the reason why I picked Mark's version of Jesus giving this great commandment to his disciples is because this is the only Gospel account in which one of Jesus' adversaries actually converts and becomes one of his followers.

We know that certain groups of people were trying to challenge and trick Jesus all the time, like the Pharisees, the Saducees, the Herodians, or loyal Herod-followers, the chief priests, the scribes.

Basically, anyone who had power in the dominant Jewish/Roman power structure, didn't like Jesus or his teachings, because he threatened their authority.

So they were always trying to catch him off guard, cause him to misspeak or mess up, to discredit him in front of his disciples, with the ultimate goal of disbanding his movement.

But shockingly, in this text, the scribe doesn't ask Jesus a question to trick him or challenge him, but because he's genuinely intrigued by Jesus and wants to know more.

The text tells us that the anonymous scribe who asked him which is the greatest commandment of all, asked Jesus this question because he overheard Jesus disputing with another scribe, and he thought that he responded well to that scribe, and so he asked him his question about the commandments.

Side note, I just want to highlight that the text says that Jesus was "disputing" with another scribe.

This implies hostility or an argument.

This description is one way that we know Jesus wasn't just having witty banter with these powerful people, they were having contentious debates.

But nonetheless, the scribe, who is supposed to be against Jesus, is impressed by him.

And then, after Jesus tells him the commandment: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself,

he has a beautiful, affirmative moment with the scribe.

The scribe says to him, *“You are right, teacher, these are much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices”* (Mark 12: 33).

And in response, Jesus applauds the scribe, and *“When [he] saw that [the scribe] had answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God’”* (Mark 12:34).

Part of why Jesus’ seemingly-simple message, to love God and to love neighbor as yourself is so threatening, is because he puts these two commandments above the law, above ritual and above sacrifice.

And guess who controlled those practices?

The Pharisees, Sadducees and Chief Priests.

It’s like, all this time, they had been the gatekeepers to God, to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Being the ones who controlled the burnt offerings and sacrifices, they were the intermediaries between the faithful Jewish people and God.

But Jesus comes along, opens those gates wide open and says come, all have access to God and to unconditional love and forgiveness.

All you have to do is love God with every part of your being, and love your fellow humans and love yourself.

He shows that he worships a kind, loving and benevolent God, not a judgmental, score-keeping, God.

And you'll notice that he doesn't tell his followers not to follow the other commandments, or not to keep the purity laws or to offer sacrifices.

He simply says, 'this is the greatest commandment.'

And even the scribe repeats back to him and says that the greatest commandment is "*much more important*" than burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Not that they shouldn't do them or that they're wrong, but the most important commandment, is like the cornerstone of our faith.

It is the one upon which all others must rest.

The strength of the commandment to love comes not from the fact that it surpasses all others, but that it holds up the rest.

You can't faithfully worship God or follow God's other commandments, if you don't first love God and love all people.

Now, I understand that there is comfort in laws, in strict order.

When it's black and white, we know what we can and can't do and what God does and does not approve of and we have the list of criteria to get us into heaven, we know what the expectations are.

But this love stuff, this is more nuanced and complicated.

We have a lot more agency, and a lot more freedom to figure it out on our own.

Jesus doesn't tell his disciples the 3-steps to loving God and our neighbors, we have to decide how to live into this love.

In the New Testament, there are two Greek words that are used to describe love.

They are phileo and agape.

Phileo is brotherly love, like friendship, mutual and reciprocal.

This is where Philadelphia gets its name and why it's called, 'The City of Brotherly Love.'

The second kind of love, agape, is the kind that's used in this passage.

This is a complete and selfless love that requires nothing in return.

This kind of love puts the other first.

It's acting in such a way that we give our very best selves to the other.

When Jesus was killed on the cross, it was out of agape love.

Now, this kind of love might sound self-sacrificial, unsustainable and unattainable.

Surely, we can't give and give of ourselves to others like this, we will become drained of all that we have.

But remember an important detail, Jesus tells the disciples to love their neighbor *as themselves*.

That means you have to offer this radical, self-less love to yourself, first.

We have to deeply desire the welfare for ourselves that we do for our neighbor.

And I think that starting with God and loving God unconditionally and extravagantly first, can help us get to the point where we can love ourselves and then offer that to our fellow humans.

We'll find that loving God and the world isn't draining, but it's gratifying.

Now, if you have been paying attention to current events this past week, it's eerily appropriate that back in June, I assigned this text to today's service.

It feels like what our country needs right now, more than anything, is agape love.

Not care and concern that judges and evaluates, but love that flows out of us without regard for circumstances, body cameras, skin color or position of power and privilege.

We need a love that we shower upon everyone, when we remember that everyone is someone's beloved.

Police officer, civilian, felon, white, black, brown, we are all beloved.

Each of us is someone's child, someone's parent, someone's best friend, someone's mentor, and nobody, nobody should die prematurely from an unjust killing.

My heart broke when I learned that the two African American men, Philandro Castile and Alton Sterling, had been killed by cops.

And when my heart was broken open and I admit, I was angry at the police, it's like I experienced emotional whiplash and it broke open again the very next day for the people I was angry at, when I learned that 5 cops in Dallas lost their lives.

Their names are Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Michael Smith and Lorne Ahrens.

I learned an important and humbling lesson this week.

While I was busy aligning myself with a marginalized group, the apparent 'powerful ones' were attacked, and I found myself grieving for them as well.

I was reminded that we are not categories, we are people, we are all neighbors.

And right now, we are called to remember that because of the way some of our beloved neighbors have historically been treated, they need extra love and support right now, but in the end, we all need to give and receive agape love.

When Jesus told his people to love their neighbor as themselves, it didn't come with an asterisk defining who is and is not our neighbor.

To literally be someone's neighbor, means to have them close to you, either physically or emotionally.

Let us draw the circle wide, draw everyone in, and remember that we belong to each other.

We are all interwoven, all being part of humanity, we are as close to each other as we can get.

Love is messy and complicated and it often doesn't have clear outcomes, but I know that when I act out of love, I never regret my actions or my decisions.

That scribe had a change of heart, turning from power and judgment, to Jesus and his message, to love above all else.

We can have a change of heart too, moving from division to unity, into agape love.

That's what our country desperately needs right now, this extravagant, unconditional love of the other without regard for who they are or where they come from or what their skin color is or what their rap sheet looks like.

And maybe, just maybe, if we truly lived into Jesus' prophetic commandment to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength,

and if we really loved our neighbors and ourselves with this kind of fierce love,

maybe then we'd learn how to stop killing each other. Amen.

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