

MARK 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, the scribe asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 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 second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that He is one, and besides him there is no other. And 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. _When 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.

RISKING LOVE

Mark 12:28-34

The monk and his novitiate sat on the bank of the river. As the water flowed by, a large scorpion fell into the water and began to flounder and drown. Without hesitation, the monk reached in and pulled the scorpion from the water. As he placed it on the bank, it stung his hand.

Several minutes later this same scorpion fell again into the river and commenced to drown. Again the monk reached in and retrieved it and again was stung. A third time the scorpion fell and a third time it was retrieved with the same results.

The novitiate who had been quietly observing all this could no longer restrain himself. "Father," he asked, "why is it that you keep saving that beastly scorpion from drowning? Can't you see it is just going to sting you?" "Yes, I know," laughed the monk. "It is the purpose of a scorpion to sting. But it is my purpose to save."

This parable underscores our lesson for this morning. Sometimes I think we hear certain scriptural sayings so often that we grow numb to their meanings. Redundancy has a way of dulling our brains. And then, too, isn't it often the case that religion becomes a tool in our lives that we pick up and use when the occasion calls for it? We try to fix things with it.

The scribes offer a case in point. They were arguing over the rank one should place the commandments and in Jewish religious practice, particularly with those who are known today as orthodox, this was a recurring debate, with one rabbinical scholar teaching one thing while others highlighted something else. This is the context in which this discussion occurs. The scribe calls Jesus, *Teacher*, which is another word for "rabbi." And when you consider the end of the conversation, we can infer the sorts of practices they were disputing: *whole burnt offerings and sacrifices* for example. So the scribe in question wants Jesus to weigh in on the matter. And how does Jesus rank them? *The first commandment is, 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 second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

The most important thing Jesus wants his audience—and us—to understand is that there is a unity between God and ourselves. We appear to exist as separate units in life, but that is an illusion. Many people miss the point when they deny the existence of God because God doesn't do what they want. The point is that God is the Source of every living creature in the entire universe. It is God who shares life with all of us. We give expression to that in the first phrase of our Doxology: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." It is a recognition that we are all connected in Spirit.

Loving your Creator, then, with your whole being is just a normal response. If you really believe this, how could you do otherwise? The scribe comprehended it on both the emotional and intellectual levels when he answers: *You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and besides him there is no other.*

The second commandment *to love one's neighbor as oneself* is therefore a natural extension of the first. How is it possible to give your entire heart to God and then to discriminate against anyone?_ It doesn't connect and doing so actually alienates us from God. It gets right back to the parable of the monk and the scorpion. The monk recognized that while the scorpion's purpose was to sting which was its God given way to protect itself from predators, it was his purpose to save. It was all based on the monk's conviction that the entirety of life is a unity. That's what love is all about. And the monk makes clear to his novitiate that love sometimes makes us vulnerable to being stung.

As difficult and risky as it is to love our neighbors at times, it seems to me that we ignore the first commandment more than the second. We continuously interact with life whether we are walking in the woods, engaged in conversation or just being out and about. And we make choices all day long about how we respond to other living beings. Those decisions are founded upon how we have defined our purpose. If it is to focus solely upon our own needs, we have forgotten that all living things emanate from the One Spirit. As the scribe attested: *You have truly said that he is one and besides him there is no other.*

I am discouraged by the refusal of millions of our citizens to get vaccinated. If they don't want to protect their own lives, that is their business. But I would remind them that it is estimated that 90,000 unvaccinated people died during the summer months. And when they do contract the virus, they expect only the best of care and drain the resources of already stressed medical facilities and personnel. And what about the lives of other unvaccinated people—especially children too young to receive it? In my opinion, refusing vaccination represents an ethical and moral failure to embrace our oneness with each other.

Has living in a privileged country led to a set of values that center on personal entitlement? Where is God in this world view? There is a German word, "zeitgeist", that refers to the spirit of the age. The church has always tried to be at the forefront of inspiring the second commandment, to love neighbor as self, to occupy a central place in our cultural

zeitgeist. But the decline of ecclesiastical influence in our society (not to mention our world) has allowed the Me First movement to become the driving force.

Metaphorically, zeitgeist can be compared to the flow of a river. A river will determine its own channel if simply left to nature. Its purpose is to find the route of least resistance as it proceeds to its destination. But it can be rerouted by dams, dredging, flood walls, and man-made canals so that it is either less dangerous in times of high water or more beneficial to those it serves.

I think we often struggle with the flow of that cultural river. I remember tubing in the Twisp River out in Washington state many years ago and when we floated over a small waterfall, we all became caught up in an eddy at the bottom which swirled us around in circles. It was fun for awhile, but working our way out required considerable effort. And so it is with pushing back against the "Me _First" zeitgeist of our age.

Jesus knew his purpose as did the monk who saved the scorpion. What is yours? What is mine? We encounter circumstances daily which challenge us to choose. I think of those who are in a relationship with a chemically addicted individual who refuses treatment who have to choose between tough love or enabling. Yes, loving can be risky. Know thyself!

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