

Mark 12:28-44

We are now well into Mark's gospel. Jesus is in Jerusalem and his time for teaching is short, this is his last week before the crucifixion. Here he explains the whole meaning of life: Love God with your whole heart and love your neighbour as yourself. The issues raised are issues of interest to the Jewish readers. The questions are exactly the sort that would interest Pharisaic Jews.

The average Christian's perspective on first century Jews, particularly their leaders: high priests, scribes, the Sanhedrin - is understandably derived from the New Testament. While the New Testament is an important source of information, it obviously can skew one's perspective because the Jewish leaders are usually portrayed as the opponents of Jesus. In today's episode we get a delightful exception to this trend.

A scribe overhears Jesus in debate with the Sadducees and is impressed by his deft handling of a tricky question. So he poses his own question to Jesus, but unlike so many others recounted in the gospels, this question is sincere. This scribe is not seeking to entrap Jesus, but to learn from him. His approach is that of a fellow rabbi, not a hostile opponent.

Jesus didn't hesitate but immediately responded with a citation of Deuteronomy known as the Shema. The Shema was a liturgical keystone for Judaism, both a prayer and an affirmation of faith. It affirmed the oneness of God and Israel's obligation to love and obey God. So in a flash Jesus answers the question with a familiar and beloved commandment.

But unexpectedly, and going beyond the scribe's question, Jesus also gives the second most important commandment: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." This commandment might have been subsumed in the first commandment. Surely loving God entails loving one's neighbour. But Jesus

is not content with love of neighbour as an implicit addendum. He gives it an explicit billing, second only to the Shema. Then, in a redundant restatement, Jesus claims no other commandment is greater than these.

Jesus will have nothing to do with a piety that has only a God-ward dimension. His twofold response to the question about the “Greatest Commandment,” rules out any religious practice that neglects human obligations. It is precisely the pseudo-piety that 1 John warns against: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” Or put another way: If loving God, who we can’t see, is hard, we can have assurance that when we love our neighbour we are loving God. The scribe affirms and reiterates Jesus’ answer. The final remark in the exchange is Jesus’ commendation of the scribe: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Sure we’ve heard these words over and over. But do we live them over and over? Is the message fresh and alive in us, shaping our thoughts and actions? Or has familiarity bred neglect, fading into the wallpaper of daily routines and competing priorities, leaving love of God and neighbour as sweet sentiments reserved for Sunday mornings.

Jesus is telling us directly: Love is the total reason for our being, the sole purpose for all Creation and our unique place in it. Love defines us. It must be who we are and what we do. If not, we’re just taking up space and wasting time. Love God. Love neighbour. This is God’s great *commandment*, not his great *suggestion*.

Jesus does not pull any punches in describing the love we owe to God. It is to be all-consuming - with our whole heart, soul and being. But even at its most intense, our love for God is only a pale reflection of God’s love for us.

God is the Great Lover. And while God's love surpasses all understanding: "God does not love us because we are valuable. We are valuable because God loves us." This is the bridge from love of God to love of neighbour. God created and Christ died for the least attractive, least accomplished, most annoying neighbour we have.

God intimately knows the cast of characters that populate our days. They are his beloved children, too. No less precious to him at their most difficult, than we are at our most endearing. We are unequivocally commanded to seek out and to love the divine spark, the image of God impressed on all of his children. Our neighbours are there to be loved, not to be endured, not to be tolerated, not to be accommodated, but to be actively loved.

Learning the words is easy. Living them is the work of a lifetime. It is the centerpiece of our Christian journey. And it requires dedication, re-dedication and re-re-dedication ... constantly focusing, staying on task, recommitting and recharging. It is demanding, but it is not drudgery. Love is the ultimate healthy habit. But no matter how we labour at love, we don't create it. It is a gift from God meant for us to nurture and return, given to us to pass along in the spirit of the Great Giver.

Christ's lesson of love should not be confused with the sentimentality that popular culture teaches us to expect. Jesus knew precisely what he was asking when he summarized what God expects of us. He knows our obligations, our limitations, our conflicts. Loving God and neighbour does not dismiss any of these realities. It puts them in perspective. Large or small, we must bring love to the tasks of today. We work in the love of God. We eat, sleep and rise in God's presence. Every task is an opportunity to return and to spread God's love. The joy, the sorrow, the boredom, the routines of our day: all are there to be undertaken in love. As Mother Teresa reminds us: "It is not how much we do that is pleasing to God, but how much love we put

into the doing.”

Jesus continues by denouncing the scribes’ pretentious piety. There are two different kinds of piety. The false kind is exemplified by the scribes. They want the places of honour. They devour widows and pray long prayers. The Hebrew Bible is filled with all kinds of admonitions that people ought to care for widows, aliens and orphans. Piety that devours widows, therefore, is not piety at all.

The final scene before the apocalyptic discourse in the next chapter occurs opposite the treasury. Wealthy people depositing large sums are contrasted with a poor widow who contributes two small copper coins, two lepta. It follows naturally on the condemnation of the scribes’ ostentatious practices. True piety is like the piety of the poor widow who puts everything she had into the treasury. Out of her poverty she gave her all.

Human beings like to seek recognition. If we give generously, we want it to be acknowledged, preferably publically: published lists of donors, plaques with names, special banquets for particularly generous donors, buildings named after them, and so on.

But loving one’s neighbour is not just about money. It includes being charitable with time, compassion, care and prayer. Studies have shown that persons in middle and lower income brackets give a higher percentage of their income to charity. Although there are exceptions, as a general rule, possessing wealth does not mean proportionate generosity with that wealth that one has. Jewish and Christian traditions often associate piety with poverty. Those who have little in material goods are aware of their dependence on God, and that they should be generous even with what little they have.

There's a story I came across some time ago titled, *The Rich Family In Church* By Eddie Ogan. He writes:

I'll never forget Easter 1946. I was 14, my little sister Ocy was 12, and my older sister Darlene, 16. We lived at home with our mother, and the four of us knew what it was to do without many things. My dad had died five years before, leaving Mom with seven school kids to raise and no money.

By 1946 my older sisters were married and my brothers had left home. A month before Easter the pastor of our church announced that a special Easter offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially.

When we got home, we talked about what we could do. We decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow us to save \$20 of our grocery money for the offering. Then we thought that if we kept our lights turned off as much as possible and didn't listen to the radio, we'd save money on that month's electric bill. Darlene got as many house and yard cleaning jobs as possible, and both of us babysat for everyone we could. For 15 cents we could buy enough cotton loops to make three pot holders to sell for \$1. We made \$20 on pot holders. That month was one of the best of our lives.

Every day we counted the money to see how much we had saved. At night we'd sit in the dark and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them. We had about 80 people in church, so we figured that whatever amount of money we had to give, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. After all, every Sunday the pastor had reminded everyone to save for the sacrificial offering.

The day before Easter, Ocy and I walked to the grocery store and had the manager to give us three crisp \$20 bills - and one \$10 bill for all our change.

We ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. We had never had so much money before. That night we were so excited we could hardly sleep. We didn't care that we wouldn't have new clothes for Easter; we had \$70 for the sacrificial offering.

We could hardly wait to get to church! On Sunday morning, rain was pouring. We didn't own an umbrella, and the church was over a mile from our home, but it didn't seem to matter how wet we got. Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the holes. The cardboard came apart, and her feet got wet. But we sat in church proudly. I heard some teenagers talking about the Smith girls having on their old dresses. I looked at them in their new clothes, and I felt rich. When the sacrificial offering was taken, we were sitting on the second row from the front. Mom put in the \$10 bill, and each of us kids put in a \$20 bill.

As we walked home after church, we sang all the way. At lunch Mom had a surprise for us. She had bought a dozen eggs, and we had boiled Easter eggs with our fried potatoes! Late that afternoon the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand. We asked what it was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 and 17 \$1 bills.

Mom put the money back in the envelope. We didn't talk, just sat and stared at the floor. We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash. We kids had such a happy life that we felt sorry for anyone who didn't have our Mom and Dad for parents and a house full of brothers and sisters and other kids visiting constantly. We thought it was fun to share silverware and see whether we got the spoon or the fork that night. We had two knives that we passed around to whoever needed them. I knew we didn't have a lot of things that other people had, but I'd never thought we were

poor.

That Easter day I found out we were. The minister had brought us the money for the poor family, so we must be poor. I didn't like being poor. I looked at my dress and worn-out shoes and felt so ashamed — I didn't even want to go back to church. Everyone there probably already knew we were poor!

I thought about school. I was in the ninth grade and at the top of my class of over 100 students. I wondered if the kids at school knew that we were poor. I decided that I could quit school since I had finished the eighth grade. That was all the law required at that time. We sat in silence for a long time. Then it got dark, and we went to bed. All that week, we girls went to school and came home, and no one talked much. Finally on Saturday, Mom asked us what we wanted to do with the money. What did poor people do with money? We didn't know. We'd never known we were poor. We didn't want to go to church on Sunday, but Mom said we had to. Although it was a sunny day, we didn't talk on the way.

Mom started to sing, but no one joined in and she only sang one verse. At church we had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun dried bricks, but they needed money to buy roofs. He said \$100 would put a roof on a church. The minister said, "Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?" We looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week. Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope. She passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me, and I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering. When the offering was counted, the minister announced that it was a little over \$100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our small church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church." Suddenly it struck us! We had given \$87 of that "little over \$100." We were the rich family in the church! Hadn't the missionary said so? From that day on I've never been poor again.

I've always remembered how rich I am because I have Jesus!

In Mark's Gospel, the widow's stewardship is commendable quite apart from the amount of her gift, which was undoubtedly dwarfed by most other gifts given that day. According to Jesus' mode of accounting, the magnitude of the gift is determined by the motivation behind the gift. It's not the dollar amount that counts, but the devotion amount.

So, does Jesus commend the widow's mite as an exemplary act of faith? Jesus' words at the end of this reading seem to be more descriptive than prescriptive. To this end, the widow's mite actually lays bare the sin of the temple offerings, rather than commend a sacrificial gift of a widow.

Jesus had just denounced the scribes, saying "they devour widows' houses." Then, two verses later, a widow makes a gift of two small copper coins. "This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.... she out of poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." The scribes didn't take care of her as prescribed by the law.

Is giving "all she had to live on" commendable, particularly for one who already suffers as a poor widow? The poor widow, lays bare the sin of the scribes, and by extension the religious establishment in general. She was not being taken care of by her neighbour - the scribes and the temple teachers.

The good news for the widow and anyone like her, is that Jesus is about destroying the systems, including the temple, which continue to oppress them and demand they sacrifice to the extent that they have nothing left to live on. For the scribes, this is not good news.

Perhaps the Good News is that Jesus brings the Kingdom of God near, even when we are still broken, corrupted and failing (as a Church, a Temple, a

community, and as individuals). Jesus comes near to tear the brokenness apart and give us new life.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE FOR LENT 4 - MARCH 10, 2024

Faithful God of love, you blessed us with your servant Son so that we might know how to serve your people with justice and with mercy. We gather the needs of ourselves and others, and offer them to you in faith and love, seeking to be strengthened to meet them.

Restore the green pastures and still waters of this earth and lead us to be responsible stewards of all that you have created.

Shepherd all peoples. Break the barriers of hatred and prejudice between those of different races, faiths, genders, age, ability, and sexual orientation, that we live peaceably together.

Bring goodness and mercy to all who suffer. Today we lift up the Gillespie family, as Kelsey awaits the birth of her twins, one of which is not expected to survive. We know that all things are possible through you, Lord, and we ask that if it is possible, that your beloved yet-to-be-born child, thrives and grows in strength and survives. We continue to uplift Deacon Keirra Maher and family, especially her young adult child, Alyx who is under the care of doctors in Victoria Hospital as they look for the cause of their sudden paralysis and begin plans for their rehabilitation.

We pray for those mourning the death of a loved one: that they may know the compassionate presence of Christ in their time of loss, and for those suffering emotionally, mentally, physically, and those suffering from substance abuse, that they may surrender their life into God's embrace and experience God's abiding presence with them.

We pray for a spiritual renewal: that God will transform our fears into hope, selfishness into love, and to continue to deepen our growth as disciples: that like Mary, we may place ourselves at the feet of Jesus to learn and understand the gift he alone offers.

We pray for growth in hope: that God will instill in our hearts a trusting reliance that God is always with us and for a Spirit of compassion: that God's love will guide us as we walk with all who have experienced any sort of loss and wait with them in their pain as they hope for healing and a new beginning.

We pray for refugees and displaced people: that those who have lost their former way of life may be called forth to a new beginning and for the growth of peace throughout the world, particularly in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, South Sudan, Haiti, and all other places of conflict: that God will open new pathways to resolve conflicts and bring opportunities and well-being to all people.

Let us pray for our spiritual leaders and church authorities: BC Synod; Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, the Moravian church, all pastors, priests, deacons, councils, musicians, and lay leaders. Today we uplift Faith Lutheran in Powell River, Our Saviour's Lutheran in Prince George and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holiday Land; the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

As we celebrate International Day of Women, we remember the women who have struggled and fought for freedom and equal rights: freedom for an education, especially where girls do not have access to schools, where they are not free to choose what to wear, where doors to higher education and many career paths are closed to them. We pray for the women who are abused by their partners or fathers or other male relatives, the women who are traded or sold into the sex trade. Open the eyes of those who do not see women and girls as equal children of a loving God and do not treat them with fairness and love. Help us all to value, respect, and appreciate the many gifts of women in our lives and the many ways they bring life, contribute, nourish and enrich the world.

We pray for this congregation. Guide us as we meet to plan for the future of this our church, and thank you for the blessings we have shared during the

past year. Continue to sustain us, inspire us, and be a part of our loving community. Give us grace to share one another's joys and burdens in humble service.

Through Christ you make us a new creation, O God, for with Him we pass from sin to the new life of grace. Accept our prayers in the warm embrace of Your compassion, and welcome all people to the festive banquet of Your table, where we may rejoice in Your love and celebrate the inheritance You have given to us. We ask this through Jesus Christ.

Amen

Together let us lift the prayer Jesus taught us, saying,

Our Father ...