

What Came First?
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Mark 12:28-34

Dr. Emerson Powery, Professor of Biblical Studies at Messiah University, opens his commentary on this text with these words:
“Nothing in Mark’s story prepared the reader for this conversation between Jesus and this Jerusalem scribe. Nothing!”¹ (exclamation point!) I thought that was quite an overstatement because, frankly, the passage lacks drama.

There was no giant reproof, no argument.

Jesus did not call the Pharisees “hypocrites”

or “white-washed tombs” as he did in other places.

How could the reader be unprepared for such an innocuous interchange? Because nothing in Mark’s Gospel has prepared the reader for agreement. Over and over in this gospel Jesus was criticized by the religious authorities, and over and over he argued with them.

So the surprise comes not because there was conflict, but because there wasn’t. Jesus and the scribe actually agreed

that the first commandments are to love God
with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,
and to love your neighbor as yourself.

They may have disagreed on how to live out those teachings, but they agreed on those foundational truths.

They agreed on what came first.

Dr. Amy Lindeman Allen points out that

in the first-century Jewish context reflected in Mark’s dialogue, ‘first’ was not about being first in line or coming out on top.

“To be ‘first’ in this context came closer to the idea of being the first stone laid—the cornerstone, upon which all of the other stones must rest.

Consequently, the greatness of the love commandment lies not in its surpassing value over and against all of the other commandments of Jewish law

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-31-2/commentary-on-mark-1228-34-4>

but, rather, in its ability to hold up all the rest.”²
 It’s not the pinnacle. It’s the foundation.
 It all begins with love.

After the tragic passing this week of Father Denny Dempsey,
 I heard several stories about him
 and the wonderful work he did here in Northfield.
 From everything I’ve heard, he was a man who truly lived his faith,
 and in such a loving way.

One of my colleagues told the story of an ecumenical service
 where Father Denny was presiding, and as a Catholic priest,
 he was not permitted to announce that all were welcome
 at the table of communion.

So instead, after speaking the prayer of consecration,
 he simply turned and served his Protestant colleague,
 silently signaling that no one would be turned away.

He found a way to live faithfully within his religious system
 while also acknowledging what was foundational, what came first:
 It all begins with love.

In our text for today it actually should not be surprising
 that Jesus and the scribe agreed on the first or greatest commandment
 because it came straight from Torah.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 reads,

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

As you may know, this is called the Shema in Judaism,
 after the first word, translated as “Hear.”

Observant Jews recite the Shema every morning and every evening,
 and teach their children to say the Shema before going to bed.

² <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-the-greatest-commandment-mark-12-28-34/>

Their days are structured and surrounded by these words.
 Their days begin and end with love.

But how do we love God?

Our conservative siblings in the faith have an easier time answering this question.

When you know who and what God is,
 when God is clearly defined as the rule-maker and judge in the sky,
 it is easier to know what is required.

When I think about liberal theology, I think about the Michael Douglas speech
 in the movie American President.

He says “America isn’t easy. America is advanced citizenship.

 You’ve got to want it bad because it’s going to put up a fight.”

Those of us in progressive or liberal churches come to worship
 because we want it bad.

We want to believe in God even if we don’t believe God will rescue us.

We want to believe in the way of Jesus even if we don’t believe Jesus was God.

We want to believe in faith even if “blind faith” makes us break out in hives.

We want to believe that faith makes a difference,

 that hope matters,
 that love is greater,
 that loves comes first.

How do we love God when we’re not even sure how to define God?

Dorotheos of Gaza was a Christian monk and abbot in the 6th century
 who described the relationship of God and humans with the image of a circle.

He said that the circle represents the world,
 with God the point at the very center.

Straight lines from the circumference to the center, like spokes on a wheel,
 are the lives of humans.

In order to draw closer to God at the center,
 you automatically become closer to others.

And you cannot pull away from others without pulling away from God.

Loving God and loving others are connected.

You cannot do the first without the second.

So then we have to ask how to love our neighbor.

We know the biblical story of the Good Samaritan,

so we know that we love by caring for the wounded.
 We know the mandates of the prophets
 so we know that we love by caring for the most vulnerable in society.
 We know that love is patience and love is kind,
 so we know that love affects our behavior.
 Love our neighbor, blah blah blah yada yada yada . . . we know this already.

And we do.

But sometimes we forget to make the connection between love and generosity.
 For those of you who are married or were in the past:
 think about when you first fell in love with someone.

How generous were you with your time? with your affection?
 How generous were you with little gifts and words of affirmation?
 How generous were you in giving the benefit of the doubt,
 assuming that his or her crankiness is because they're tired,
 not because they're an insensitive jerk?

Relationships are headed for trouble when the people in them
 no longer have generous spirits toward one another.

My parents have one of the sweetest romances I've ever known.
 Before my dad retired, his one household job inside the house
 was unloading the dishwasher every morning.

They had been married 30 or 40 years
 when one morning Mom got up after Dad had already left for the day,
 and when she walked into the kitchen she found kitchen utensils
 scattered all over the counter.

She admits that her first thought was "Vernon! What were you thinking?"
 But she gave him the benefit of the doubt,
 knowing my dad always has a reason for everything he does.
 So she looked closer and saw that he had written out "I love you"
 in kitchen utensils.

Years later I mentioned this story and Mom said, "Oh, I'd forgotten about that!"
 I said, "How could you forget something so sweet?"
 She said, "Well, your father does sweet things for me all the time!"
 There is a generosity in my father's love.

I experience it, too.

My parents, as I've mentioned, are conservative evangelical.
They have struggled mightily with my sexual orientation,
because the way they interpret scripture says that who I am is wrong.
Staying in relationship hasn't always been easy,
and there were some times I had to put a little distance between us
for my own mental health.

But we never gave up on each other, in spite of our differences,
because we love one another.

One day my mother asked my father,

"Do you think we could be wrong about this?"

His answer was: "I pray that we are."

There is a generosity to their love.

It has been said that you can give without loving,
but you cannot love without giving.
It all begins with love.

And so it is with our church, too.

We love this congregation.

I've only been here a month, have only known of your existence for 7 months,
and still I love this church!

How much deeper your love must be,
for it has nourished you and fed you.

It has rejoiced with you through good news of great joy,
and it has supported you through devastating loss.

This church—the people of this church—have educated you,
encouraged you, challenged you, and empowered you
to take a stand, to make a difference.

This church has loved your children
and visited your ailing parents.

This church has made a difference in your life, and in the lives of so many,
and so you love . . .

and so you are generous.

That doesn't mean you always understand the church,
the leaders, or the people in the next pew.

There may be times you need to step back temporarily
for your mental health.

And there may be times when you look at the leaders
and experience the equivalent of
“Vernon! What were you thinking?!”

But the message spelled out on the kitchen counter is love.

And the message handed out with a cup of coffee is love.

And the message sung by the choir is love.

And the message teaching your teens about consent is love.

And the message holding your hand at the funeral home is love.

It all starts with love.

And so we come to this Commitment Sunday,

and I pray that the message written on your “estimate of giving” is love.

I hope that the love and gratitude you feel for this congregation

and the ministries of this church

is adequately reflected in your gift.

I say “adequately” knowing that we are not all able to make the same size gift,

and “adequate” is not a judgment on that ability.

But I want you to know that your love is strong enough and big enough

that you could give more than you thought you could.

I want you to know that we were able to keep the two-pastor model

we desperately need because you helped make it happen.

I want you to know that love made you generous.

Bind that on your hands.

Write that on your heart.

Write that on your door and on your gate,

so you will see it coming and going.

Amen.