

Mark 12:28-34

In The Game

Love God, love neighbour, inspire love

We are deep into football right now. If you are a CFL fan you are nearing the end of the season with playoffs just around the corner. If you are NFL you are pretty much mid-season, and if you have kids or grandkids in school playing football then you have been sitting on the sidelines cheering for a number of weeks now. I will tell you that I am not someone who appreciates the finer points of the game. Anything I know comes from reading a few articles and being within earshot of games on the TV my entire life.

What I do understand is that a few things need to happen for a team to win. They have to know the rules, they have to play as a team, they need to make their way down the field toward their end zone, and there is the ultimate goal of getting a touch down. Most of the game is spent moving 10 yards at a time to the ultimate goal.

In the scripture reading Jesus has been in block and tackle mode for a few chapters. Scribes and Pharisees have been trying to trip Jesus up with their rule book and so pose questions from, why do the disciples eat without washing their hands, to a demand for a sign that Jesus is who he says he is – this after he fed a crowd of thousand with a few loaves of bread and some fish. He has answered them as they tested him about whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife and, by what authority he was doing all that he was doing. He even fields questions from another religious sect called the Sadducees who do not believe in resurrection but test Jesus on his understanding. Each time Jesus has an answer for them.

And now this question from a scribe who has been on the sidelines at the temple listening to the conversations and seeing that Jesus answered the people well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all? In other words which is the most important rule of the game.

The answer that Jesus gives is called the *Shema*, and it has been recited daily by Jews for centuries. The Shema, which comes directly out of the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy (6:4-6) says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Jesus added the words, and with all your mind.

Now before we go further in thinking about this scripture, I would like to point something out in light of the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the public vigil that was held at the Synagogue here in Thunder Bay last evening. When Jesus gives his answer, including “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” he is

answering as a Jewish man. Every disciple was a Jew, later on in the history of the church the apostle Paul was a Jew, Jesus was a Jew. There were no Christians. Our Christian faith comes out of the Jewish faith. Our scriptures include the scriptures of the Jewish people. So, when an attack happens on a synagogue, it is an attack on our faith as well.

Coming back to the conversation that is happening between Jesus and the scribe we recognize that it is between two people of the Jewish faith. They are both well versed in the Torah. When Jesus answers, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, it is the expected answer. He is not in disagreement with anyone on this.

And though he was asked which commandment is the first of all, Jesus gives a second part to the answer, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Again, taken straight out of the Torah, Leviticus 19:18. But Jesus states them as one commandment, not as two.

The basis for all of this is love. God's love flowed so strongly between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit that, creation came out of that overflowing love. We were created out of love and for love. Our connection to God is love and we are to love with every fibre of who we are. We are do it with heart, soul, mind, and strength.

How many of us could say this is how we love God? For a moment try to imagine loving God with every part of who you are inside and out. (Pause) See if you can feel love for God flowing out of who you are. (Pause).

It may be that this is a difficult task. We often get focused on things in our lives that take away from this work of loving God with all that we are. Illness, death, debt, or the accumulation of wealth, the next fix of whatever you are hooked on from tv programs, to Facebook or Instagram, to shopping, to substance abuse, all take away from our purpose of loving God with all that we are.

Now if we love God then the second piece that Jesus spoke about also comes into play. We cannot love God without loving our neighbour. Every human being is loved by God, so to show hatred, disdain, disgust, or not care about our neighbour is to say that we don't love God. It is why Jesus said, "There is no other commandment greater than these. The two are bound together. Love God, Love Neighbour. The Love neighbour piece has a little extension to it. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Note that this is not a self-centered "love yourself", in our time when people are into self care and self-help books. These can be important topics, but in this case, we are to know that just by virtue of the fact that we are created in God's image and are loved by God we have value. Just like our neighbour who is loved by God, each of us is loved by God. So it boils down to, Love God, Love Neighbour, Love Yourself, because we are made from and for love.

Our first play, our first down, is to love God, love neighbour, and love oneself. And we keep doing this 10 yards at a time so to speak. You may see this as different plays in

the playbook, the most important play being worship. Worshiping God in church on a Sunday morning, on the dock at the camp, as you knit or paint or create are all part of the playbook. It is how we become strong players, but individual players do not get first downs, touch downs, or field goals. It takes the entire team focused on the play to make inching toward the end zone a reality.

It is why the church is such an important part of our faith. We do not live out our lives as Christians in isolation from one another. We become part of a team effort to become stronger players, and a stronger team, a stronger worshipping community that can reach out to our neighbours and bring the Good News of this love of God to more and more people.

Though helpful, analogies only go so far, and the love of God for each of us, and the commandment to love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength and love our neighbour as we love ourselves, runs pretty deep. It is not like a game that we can walk away, where the rules can change from time to time, and where the end goal is to make a touchdown.

In the story, we are not told whether or not Jesus got a touch down and the scribe followed him. We only know that Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." As Christians, we recognize that we only really get the touchdown when our lives end and we find ourselves living in the arms of pure love, but in the meantime, we can measure how we are doing. In football we measure first downs, in our Christian life we measure by how we are changed through faith, with Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the love of God, coaching us with words of scripture and the wisdom of others. Our love is measured not only by how it transforms us but also by how it reaches others.

The answer Jesus gave, and all Jews knew, was a concise answer to the question what is the greatest commandment. It wrapped up everything into an easy to remember focus, but it is only a start. Study is needed and dialogue is necessary for us to learn the depth of the commandment. You cannot know only this statement and then ignore the rest of scripture. In team sports it is not enough to know what the end game is, you need to study plays, to build your mind and your body for the rigors of the game, you need to follow the coaching staff.

In worship and other gatherings, we come together to learn, dialogue, build our spiritual muscle, and learn how to work as a team. We learn to love. We are made for love, it is the end goal, it is our focus. Love God, Love Neighbour, Love yourself. And we do this in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.