

Mark 12:28-34

## No Other Commandment

Love God and love neighbour. That's it. All we need to do. So simple. So straightforward a statement. No other commandment greater than these. "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one, 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 neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these." (v29-30)

I have always been fascinated with the fact that these appear to be two commandments but Jesus answers with there is no other commandment ...singular ...greater than these...plural. These two statements are so interconnected there is no separating the two. Still, let's start with taking a look at love the Lord your God.

"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. On the surface it sounds like the thing to do. If you have any thought of God, it is what one might want to be able to do. Yet, we are here together this All Saints Day, yes, to worship, but for many of us it is even more so because we are remembering someone close to us that has died. Regardless of whether it was someone in this past year or someone years ago, it may be hard to feel like you desire to love God with all your soul, mind, and strength. How can we love God when it feels like death has taken away so much of your love and life? We want to blame God for the hurt. In comfort we entrust the loss, the person to God, but it can be easy to stay bitter, to blame God for our pain.

We forget that God, in the person of Jesus, has suffered death too. I honestly believe that if we are made in God's image, then God knows the pain of loss. God's own loss in a humanity that doesn't know how to love, the darkness that can overcome the emptiness in times of death, and so also grieves with each of us when we grieve.

How does one love God with all their soul and with all their mind and with all their strength? Mysteriously, it doesn't have to come from our brute strength and determination. We have our part in that, but God meets us where we are at in pain, loss, and struggle. Slowly, as we determine to heal, to let God and others in, we find life again. And if we can't get there, it can start with as little as saying God I am here I need you to show up in a way I can recognize.

I have a Beatles' song going through my head with the words,

All you need is love.

All you need is love.

All you need is love, love.  
Love is all you need.

It is true. It is that basic but also so complex and layered. All you need is God's love and to love God, but one must first accept that God loves you. Then there is that second part to the one commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (v31)

In a time when we can think only of how divided we are this seems an impossible ask. And it is. In and of ourselves this is impossible. Remember when Jesus is speaking about your neighbour, he is not just referring to the person next door or across the street or hallway. Our neighbour is any human being. Our neighbour is the one who we totally disagree with about immigrants or wars. Our neighbour is the person sitting on the steps of the church or living in the encampments at the edge of our water ways. Our neighbour is Israel and Palestine, our neighbours are other Christians who don't read and interpret the Bible the way we do. The neighbour is not just those who think and act like we do, who fit into our boxes about what is acceptable and not. Jesus made no distinction. So really, this is an impossible thing to live out.

There are so many things, so many people that don't meet our personal or corporate approval. It happens in schools when one group of kids decides somehow that they are better than another child and bullying starts. It happens in our hockey arenas and on basketball courts and not necessarily or only with the kids but with the coaches and parents. We only need to look at any screen and we can find groups of people at odds with another. With the U.S. election only days away, the divisions in that land are screaming at us even here in Canada. But it is everywhere, politicians and people are attacking one another. There are great divides when it comes to discussions about self-governance for indigenous people and apologies. Race, culture, religion, borders, rich and poor...one could go on for days about the ways we are divided.

Yet here stands this command, Love God and love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

Now I didn't grow up watching Mr. Rogers, but there would be few people listening who wouldn't know who he was. There was even a wonderful movie made about his life back in 2019 with Tom Hanks in the starring role. Mr. Rogers' neighbourhood was a simple place on TV, he was the daily bread of many children, just as many of that same generation grew up watching The Friendly Giant or Mr. Dressup. What all of these shows were about was how to treat your neighbour. How to accept differences and see possibilities. The shows were about loving your neighbour as yourself. It was done through conversation and experience.

But then we realize that life is complicated. Think back to your own childhood. Do you remember wondering why you were supposed hate one person on the school playground? Somehow feeling that if you didn't go along with the hate that it might be you that would be turned upon. Maybe you experienced that. From there the hate, judgement, and exploitation just seem to get reasoned out. Somewhere along the line

our experience teaches us that what one values is more important or somehow more valuable than what someone else values, whether it be the colour of one's skin or the politics we align with. With each passing year we find more ways and reasons to judge what and who is important and/or valuable.

As we age, we come to realize we are so far gone that this loving neighbour as oneself is really an impossible task. And it is. In and of ourselves it is impossible to do this. But just maybe we can strive to each day question our understanding of neighbour. Just maybe we can do a kindness that we hadn't done before for someone or some group that we thought we disliked. We can take time for a conversation with someone we don't align with, not to change their thinking but to learn. We can look for a way to experience things and people we don't understand. If each of us did that on a daily, weekly, or even monthly basis what changes would ripple through our church, our families, our community and maybe even our world. The fear of the unknown about another would loosen its grip on our hearts, minds, and bodies.

There are ways to do this. Join Diversity Thunder Bay, volunteer at the food bank, go to the Masjid when they have an open house. You don't have to immerse yourself in it everyday, but you can take moments to experience and speak with someone else. Smile at the immigrant student working at Walmart, wish them a good day, thank them for their help. You can walk across the street or the hall to your literal neighbour and do a kindness. You can take a look at the action teams our church is developing as these are ways that we are going to work at engaging our neighbours.

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 and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.

Both seem impossible. Yet when we are able to begin, with faith in God to walk with us in the impossible, we begin to see the possible. I am not naïve enough to think we are going to see peace on earth anytime soon, but when we trust God to work in us, in our grief, in our pain, in our judgement, in our lives, something starts to change within us. When we become image bearers of God in the world then other things start to change around us. Then we find, as Jesus said to the scribe, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." A kingdom not of forced rule, power, and politics, but a kingdom of love, forgiveness, peace, hope, grace, and even joy and learning.

May you know this day that God is with you, that the Holy Spirit is with you as comforter, guide, and teacher, and Jesus Christ goes with you as Saviour and friend. For just as we are to love God and neighbour, God loves you, is with you, and goes with you. Amen.