

November 3-4, 2018

"A Simple Gospel"

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Mark 12:28-34

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; I Thessalonians 2:1-8

Fred Craddock tells the story of a missionary couple serving in China. When the Communists came to power, this family was told they had to leave the country. They were also told they could only take with them a maximum of 150 pounds. They inventoried all they owned and began deciding what they would take and what they would leave behind. It was a tortuous decision because they had beautiful, hand-carved furniture and ivory carvings made by the finest craftsmen of China. They also had in their possession priceless ink drawings on rice paper. They had spent many years serving in China and so had collected many fine pieces in decorating their home.

When mother and father and their two children arrived at the dock with their carefully packed bundles, a government official with a clipboard approached them. He looked at their package and emotionlessly asked, "Did you weigh your children?" Suddenly their possessions didn't matter so much. When you get to the bottom line, simplicity can be a friend in determining those things that are of ultimate value.

Today's gospel is yet another of these public examinations of Jesus. The religious leaders asked Jesus a simple question as a trap. While it looked like a casual public interest poll, it was a question meant to trip him up: "*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?*"

One can almost imagine the all-night arguments they must have had over that question! The Bible is so big, so diverse. If you were asked that question, "What is the most important verse in all the Bible?" how would you answer? It's a great question to start an argument, to thrust Jesus into the middle of a theological controversy. Everyone has his or her favorite verse, the greatest verse which ought to be quoted and followed by everyone.

Without blinking an eye, Jesus quoted to them what they already knew by heart. The beloved Shema of Deuteronomy 6:5, the command to love God above everything, joining it to Leviticus 19:18, the command to love our neighbor. Notice there's nothing original or controversial here. The rabbis had long cited these two verses together as a marvelous, concise summary of the whole law of Israel.

Of course, we should remember that Jesus' critics were not seeking new information or spiritual enlightenment. They were seeking how to trap him, tangle him in the theological briars, or how to provoke him into saying something so outrageous they

would be able to convict him and get rid of him once and for all. Not everyone with a question is a seeker, exploring their faith for growth, but wanting to make faith a provocation, to turn it into a test for piety or orthodoxy.

Karl Barth once said: "The Bible gives to every person and to every era such answers to their questions as they deserve. We shall always find in it as much as we seek and no more." The Pharisees who came to Jesus were not seeking real answers. They were trying to make themselves look good and to make Jesus look bad.

An apocryphal story is told about Martin Luther who was lecturing a group of seminarians one day on the creation of the world in the Book of Genesis when one of the seminarians asked, "Doktor Luther, what was God doing before he created the world? What did he do with himself for all those years?"

The seminarians snickered together at the "smartness" of the questioner. "What was God doing before he created the world?" Luther roared, "He was gathering sticks to make switches to beat the devil out of stupid people like you who ask stupid questions!"

The Pharisees didn't want to grow in their faith and understanding. What they wanted was to play theological ping-pong. They wanted to play a game of theological "one-upmanship." Jesus gave them nothing controversial, new, or radical. He merely quoted back to them what they already knew, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself."

What good is our creed, the summary statements of our beliefs, if those beliefs don't make any difference in the way that we live, in the ways that we act? It is not enough to believe something we must live it as well!

Here we sit in church. Sometimes it seems we build our churches to look older than they really are, we furnish them with big, heavy furniture, with pews bolted down to the floor, and everything made from the best woods to make everything look old, eternal, substantial, fixed, in order to give the illusion it will be here forever ... so we can come back here next week and debate it all again.

Don't rush to judgment. There's always tomorrow. Debate, question, ponder, think, ... and then come back next week to do it all over again! It will all be here, just as it is today. But no, finally there is that moment when Jesus looks at us: Enough of your questions. Enough evasion, dodging, and ducking. Call for the question, the question. Now rise to the heart of the matter, to live the faith.

These two principles, *Love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength*, and *Love your neighbor as yourself*, as that which is given to us to be the two lights that illuminate our path. We should see them those ways we can understand our mission in life and to hold both of them in balance, each with the other. The first law is the point of beginning by make God our first priority. The

next is to be held up as surely as the first that we should love our neighbor as yourself. Take them together as the vertical and the horizontal means by which we can live to the glory of God.

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