

Hayward United Methodist Church

Pastor Samuel's Message for the Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost, October 31, 2021

"The Greatest Commandment"

Text: Mark 12:28-34

Gospel Reading: Mark 12:28-33 (NRSV)

One of the scribes came near and hear them disputing with one another and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and 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 neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Prayer for Illumination (UMH 6)

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that, as the Scriptures are read and your word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The Gospels present different stories. No two stories are alike. Because Jesus dealt with different people in various situations. Sometimes Jesus was engaged in healing ministry. Sometimes Jesus was engaged in teaching ministry. Sometimes Jesus spoke to the crowd. Other times Jesus taught the disciples. Jesus answered questions people asked. This all shows that Jesus met the various needs of the people. When the gospel tradition was transmitted to different audience, the message addressed their life situation. People could relate their own experience or even their expectations to the stories of Jesus and gained spiritual strength. Over the centuries people found hope and courage as they read the stories of Jesus. As the contemporary audience and recipient of the Gospels, we need to keep reflecting on what it means in our context and more particularly in our own life situation.

Not only the Gospels but also the entire Scriptures speak to our situations. As we meditate on the Scriptures, we can discover the message that brings hope and

peace to our lives. The Scriptures also call us to practice. Jesus many times said that one should not be just hearers of the word, but doers of the word. Each time we read and hear the Scripture preached, we should keep asking the question, how can I put the message into practice? The Scribes came to test Jesus. They wanted to know which is the greatest commandment. Every Jew knew about the importance of the law of Moses. The law of Moses contains almost 613 commandments. All commandments are supposed to be kept and followed. But the Scribes wanted to know the most important commandments. They wanted to keep only the important commandments. So the Scribes asked Jesus about the greatest commandment.

First, the first great commandment. Jesus knew the minds of the Scribes. He knew they came to test Jesus. Most of the Scribes already knew the answer. But Jesus put his answer in perspective. He knew the importance of the commandments. He openly said that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Jesus knew the importance of keeping the law of Moses. He himself followed the commandments faithfully. He went to temple to worship God. He went to the Synagogue to pray and hear the word of God read to him. He went to help the poor and the needy. He ministered to the strangers.

The first great commandment is all about God. The people of Israel believed in one God. They confessed their belief in one God in public and private worship. The first great commandment calls people to proclaim the oneness of God. It is an invitation. It begins by saying, "Hear, O Israel." In Hebrew it is known as "*Shema*." The Jewish law demands that every Jew should confess their faith in the oneness of God at least twice a day, morning and evening. Both morning and evening prayers form the essence of the law of Moses. Other times the Jews will keep uttering their faith in the oneness of God. They believed that God is one and there is no other God beside the one God. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

The great commandment not only calls people to express their faith in one God, but it calls them to do it with their heart, soul, mind, and strength. In other words, the people are called to totally commit themselves to this one God. When they confess their faith or when they come to worship God, they should have undivided attention. Their whole being should be involved in their commitment to God and what God stands for. God is love. God demands justice and love from God's people. Most of the Jews went to the temple to pray and show their

devotion. Some of them even prayed at home daily to show their love for God. Even some others went to the market place to pray in public so that others would appreciate their commitment. The law demands that people should express their faith inwardly and outwardly.

Jesus affirmed that God should come first in one's life. Devotion to God should constitute the whole being. It is not just going to the temple to pray. It is not just uttering the first great commandment. One should examine whether they take God into all their being. Does every part of life center around God. Jesus is talking about putting faith into practice. One's faith in God should involve heart, mind, soul, and strength. Jesus taught that one should seek the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness first. God should occupy the first place in one's life. All other things come second or even derive from it. It is not simply the expression of faith, but practice of faith. Jesus is talking about imitating God. God loved everyone. God gave God's only Son to die on the cross. So those who confess the oneness of God are called to love and serve one another. This is a quiet challenge for the Scribes back then. They limited their love of God only to worship and prayer. They did not take God into every realm of life. Jesus teaches that God should be taken into all realms of life. The love of God should saturate one's life.

Second, the second great commandment. Jesus draws attention to another great commandment. No one expected that Jesus would quote that. Probably the Scribes expected that Jesus would again quote from one of the ten commandments. But to their surprise, Jesus quotes Leviticus 9:18. This is not part of the ten commandments. It is a lengthy commandment on how people should treat their neighbors. In that context it is said that one should love their neighbors as yourself. A Jew would immediately catch it. Because for the Jews a neighbor is someone who lives next door. They were taught to love their neighbors and help them in whatever way they should.

Because this commandment, loving neighbor is not part of the ten commandments many Jews neglected it. They focused on the ten commandments, especially believing one God and worshiping one God. Their main worship centered around the temple. They faithfully went to the temple and confessed their faith. It never occurred to them that loving one's neighbor would equal to the first commandment. Jesus surprised them. Jesus taught something new. Jesus always taught what people did not expect. Because Jesus

taught someone who had authority. His authority derived from God. He revealed the mind of God.

What does it mean to love one's neighbor as yourself? What does it mean to consider this as the great commandment? Life lived according to God's laws is relational. The history of Israel teaches that God was involved in the life of the people. That is why God heard the cry of the people when the people were in bondage in Egypt. He sent Moses to redeem them. He led them through the wilderness for forty years. He provided food and protection during their sojourn to Canaan. He sent prophets to call people to turn to God. He sent Jesus to show God's love to one another.

Jesus considered the first great commandment as equal to the second great commandment. It is like two sides of a coin. Both are great commandments. Both should be kept. If the worship of one God is important, it is equally important to love one's neighbor. The law demands that we should love both God and neighbors. One without the other is not serving the purpose of God. One without another is not complete. One without another is not fulfilling the very intention of the mind of God.

What is God calling us to do? God wants us to examine ourselves in light of what Jesus. Jesus made it clear that there are two great commandments. These two great commandments sum up the law and the prophets. The entire law of God dwells upon these two. Jesus calls us to take an inventory of our lives. Let's make a list and see what we do to love both God and neighbors. Do we love God with all our mind, with all our soul, with all our heart, and with all our strength? Do we love our neighbors in the same way we love God? What are the things that we could more to love God? What are the things we could do more to love our neighbors, whether they live next door to us or they are friends or relatives? Let's work on the things that would fulfill those two great commandments. God Bless.

Pastor Samuel

Let's say the Benediction together:
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with us all. Amen.