

One of the scribes came near and heard 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; 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.’ Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”; and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbor as oneself”,—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.

For two Sundays in a row, you had wonderful messages brought to you by an excellent teacher, Rabbi Shefa, and a preacher Rev. Lynne Hinton. So, bear with me just for a moment. I want us to go back to the last time I worshipped with you, three Sundays ago. Let us recall: Jesus was answering a question from a man who wanted to know what he needed to do in order to inherit Eternal Life, which is to say, to enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus told him, “you know the commandments: you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not lie, you shall not cheat, honor your father and mother.” There, not in the exact order but Jesus was listing the second part of the Ten Commandments that has to do with our relationship with one another; how we treat our neighbors. And the man said, “I’ve been doing all that already.” To me, he sounded like someone who was asking for that special gift because he had everything, or so he thought.

Then Jesus said, “you lack one thing,” and told him to sell everything he owned and give it to the poor, then he would have treasure in heaven, and then “come follow me.” And the man couldn’t bring himself to do that. See, Jesus knew, the man’s heart was firmly set on his treasure on earth, even as he was inquiring about Eternal Life, the ultimate treasure in Heaven. The man was so attached to his earthly treasure that he couldn’t let it go. His wealth was his God; it was his First Love.

The first part of the Ten Commandments has to do with our relationship with God; you shall have no other gods before me. The man had the *god of wealth* before the *God of Eternal Life*. The man would follow the 2nd part of the commandments about how to treat your neighbor, so long as he didn’t have to sacrifice his earthly treasure, his First Love, which he carefully

guarded. Apparently, love of one's own wealth doesn't naturally translate into loving one's neighbor as oneself.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is answering a question again. This time, from a certain scribe, an expert of the Law of Moses. The legal experts had calculated that there were 365 prohibitions, the "thou shall nots" and 248 positive commands, the "you shalls", 613 laws in total. This scribe, noticing how Jesus was beating all other religious authorities in legal disputations, wanted to know which law Jesus would say is the "first among them all."

Jesus answers, the first is "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. This is from the Hebrew Scripture, Deuteronomy 6: 4-5, "Shema," which Yvonne read for us. It is the call to worship given in the Temple. "Shema" is foundational to the Jewish faith and has long been recited by the Jewish community twice daily, in the morning and evening, "when you lie down and when you rise" (Deut. 6:7). Throughout history, it was the final testament of faith for Jewish martyrs. All the faithful would have those words on their lips, professing their love for God as the last drop of their strength left them.

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Reading Christian commentaries on these verses, many say, "oh, it's just a way of saying Love God with your whole being." Well, that's vague... I think there was a point in how this command is expressed; I think it's helpful to realize we don't just "love God in general," but we are called, and can love God in so many different ways.

Paying attention to how our heart and mind, our soul, and our energy are engaged in "Loving" God, is to experience God's love in all these aspects of our being. Because, though we've come to think of the Law in a restrictive sense of "keep them or else!", the truth is, from the very beginning, the Law is God's gift given to us, all wrapped up in God's boundless Love. God's commandments come to us in love; it's God's reaching out to us in love, calling us to love God back. That's one way of understanding what God Is Love means.

The command to Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength is the command to fill our heart, mind, soul with the Divine Love that God's love becomes our love and strength and power. It is not so much as our "doing" as our opening ourselves and receiving, and allowing ourselves to be changed. When we love God back in this way, we are filled to the brim with the Divine Love that it overflows from our heart and mind and soul, with mighty strength,

to our neighbors, even to the ones we wouldn't have loved, or can't imagine loving, before God's love entered into our heart.

The love emanating from the man, whose love rested on the god of his wealth, couldn't flow beyond the safe harbor he created for his own wealth, which was far from heaven. The love that gushes into us when we open our hearts and mind and soul to God's love, gushes forth, abundantly, without reserve, outward from within us, or it's not the Divine Love. Hence, Jesus said, the second is this "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Don't block it. You can be extravagant about it because the source is Divine and limitless. Be generous with Love.

Although the scribe specifically asked "which law is the first of all," Jesus didn't stop at the first but added the second: Love your neighbor as yourself, which is another law found in the Hebrew Scripture, Leviticus. 613 laws, including the Ten Commandments, reduced to these two, and the first flows into the second, they are inseparable.

It is simpler to remember, but it requires using all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength to discern what "loving neighbor" looks like in any given moment. Jesus should be known as the Father of situation ethics and contextualism. People will inevitably disagree. In Hebrew, "Heart" is not just where we "feel" feelings; it is also where we discern things, much like the "mind." Soul is our unique, individual embodiment of the Divine Spark that gives life to everyone. Loving God with all our soul, we bring our uniqueness into relationship with the Divine and with our neighbor. And the "strength" is not just our physical strength but the power we exercise in the world.

To love God is to be driven, motivated, inspired, and guided by the Divine Love as we go about our everyday lives feeling, discerning, reflecting, and exercising our power as we live in this messy world. St. Paul calls upon Christians to be of the same mind, the mind of Christ, but inevitably there will be disagreements.

The Scribe who asked Jesus which commandment is the first of all, agrees with Jesus' that the most important thing is to be laser focused on "Loving God and loving our neighbor." Jesus commends the scribe, saying, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." This scribe is the only one who gets a positive treatment in the Gospel of Mark. Up until this point in Mark's Gospel, the religious authority figures like the Sadducees and the Pharisees, regarded Jesus with suspicion, challenging his actions and teaching, questioning his authority.

As we go to the poll and wait in line to cast our vote, Love God and your neighbor with your vote. As we sit down for the Thanksgiving dinner and listen to the conversation around the table and you don't know whether to laugh or cry, as we make decision how we spend our money on Black Friday, the question to guide us will be "what is the most loving thing to do, or not do, say or not say." Is this "loving" in the way that reflects the Divine Love the Spirit is filling me in? Does it flow out of my love for God and God's love for me? Does it make my heart glad? And we use all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength to discern the answer.

When those who lived in this way complete their lives here on earth and leave the physical existence, they return to their source, the Love of God, from which all of us came and where all of us return. It is there we are always united as One, the living and the dead. Even now. For God's Love is boundless and everlasting.

So, go ahead and be extravagant in loving, generous in forgiving, and may we remain open to the ever-flowing Love of God to carry us beyond our comfort zone, till we hear the Spirit whisper "you are not far from the kingdom of God," to join all the saints in the unending Love of God. Amen.