

Liturgy of the Word, Mark 12. 28-34, Twenty Third Sunday After Pentecost, 31st October
2021

Mark 12:28-34

The Greatest Commandment as the Most Loving Act of Grace

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The Collect

God of love,
you have taught us that without love
whatever we do is worth nothing:
pour into our hearts your most excellent
gift of love,
and by it impel us to care for our brothers and
sisters;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,

who lives and reigns with you and the
Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting.
Amen

Readings

Ruth 1:1-18
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:11-14
Mark 12:28-34

Liturgy of the Word: The Greatest commandment as the most loving act of grace

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 neighbour 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 neighbour 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 (Mark 12:28-34)

Having restored the sight of Bartimaeus, on the wayside, as he left Jericho towards Jerusalem, Jesus has displayed the most loving act of grace that his disciples are to undertake if they are to follow him. In the account that follows, Mark 11:1-11, a narrative set aside for Palm Sunday, as a prelude to Passion Week in the Christian calendar, Jesus fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah 5:1-7, by entering Jerusalem in triumph as the son of David. Having entered Jerusalem in triumph, for the first time, to bring salvation through his death on the cross, Jesus has established the ideal of costly love as the most loving act of grace to serve as a pattern for Christian discipleship. Today’s gospel is an outpouring symbolism of divine grace that brings to reality, in one story, all that which Jesus had to face to the end, by giving his life on the cross as a ransom for many. Hence, Jesus’ engagement with the scribe is prophetic, biblically based, and decalogue aligned. In the commandment, Jesus reinforces the use of scripture in the prophetic answer to the scribe’s question about the first commandment. By quoting the great text of Judaism (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), the *Shema*, recited daily by Jews, Jesus has outpoured the most loving act of grace in practical terms. By adding the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself (Leviticus 19:18), Jesus seeks to demonstrate that one cannot love God without loving the neighbour.¹

¹ Suggit, John: *The Gospel and the Gospels*. Celebration of Faith, Cape Town 1997, p. 30

For Jesus, the love of God, as the moral basis of the Torah, can only be made real and experienced only in the love of one's neighbour. This 'conjunction was not unknown to Judaism, but the way in which Jesus combined the two commandments sums up the ethical as well as the theological teaching of the Torah,' taking the hearers of his day, particularly the scribes and the Pharisees, well beyond their narrowed understanding of love as enshrined in the law of Moses. In this, Jesus has established not only his authority as a Messiah but also as the very meaning of his identity, the 'fulfilment of the law', winning the approval of the scribes that no one dared to ask him to question any longer (Mark 12:34). As Jesus wins the approval of the scribes, we can also learn that the Christian faith has the power not only to bring peace but also to quell any adversities and bring the storms of life to silence. In this, Jesus has established his authority that would prevail even beyond the cross, serving forever as the moral basis of Christian faith and ethical principle of Christian discipleship.²

Turning the Second Commandment into the First

What are we to make of a Jesus who resorts to scripture and tradition to ground the commandment to love God as dependent on the need for love towards one's neighbour? When Jesus summarizes the law in two commandments, 'Love your God' and 'Love your neighbour,' he quotes it from scripture (Deut. 6:4-5; Lev. 19:18) which was part of his faith and continues to be the scripture of the Jewish people to this day. In Judaism loving one's neighbour was never foreign to the religious and daily practice of the day, for loving one's neighbour was a moral equivalent in the law of Moses. But loving one's neighbour, as the law stipulates, was never thought beyond the horizons of the Torah, to include the stranger, as Jesus now seems to deconstruct it by making it more authentic and interdependent. By making the second first, Jesus has problematized to the core the ideal of love in the Jewish religious practice, challenging the hearers of his day to use the Torah with sensitivity, by making it more neighbourly responsive than self-seeking. Jesus was ahead of his time and aware of the fact that loving God with all one's heart could be a matter of personal devotion, faithfulness, but could also run the risk to be reduced to glamour, hence being falsely claimed. Contrary to the prevailing practices of the day, Jesus' call to loving the neighbour as oneself reinforces the practice of love by making it more challenging and visible, hence realigning the practice of one's faith to the Torah and making it open to public scrutiny. As Nolan puts it, 'Jesus was a prophet with a prophetic message for the people of his time.'³ I have no doubt that Jesus' teaching may assist us in making our Christian faith more prophetically and authentically sensitive to the needs of the lost and the excluded of our own time.

Indeed, Jesus' teaching could not have been underestimated. In his boundary-breaking ministry could, indeed, have turned the world upside-down, by extending the commandment to love one's neighbour beyond the horizons of the familiar to include the stranger. In doing so, Jesus restored the sight and consciences of the people of his day, extending their horizons to the domain, presence, and compassion of a God who chose to forfeit his own privileges and ambitions to the benefit of the people caught in despair, caught in the stormiest of circumstances, a God who chose to offer himself as a ransom to many, even beyond the realm of Israel. But by its very nature, Jesus's reading of the Torah also shows that this is also a God of Christianity, a God who Christ believed in and derived his wisdom from. We can take solace from this God as we try to come to terms with the challenges of our own time in the spirit of Jesus.

²Op. cit., 1997, p. 30

³ Nolan, Robert: *God in South Africa. The Challenge of the Gospel*. David Philip, Cape Town 1988, p. 123

The boundary-breaking nature of Jesus' ministry

In Mark 12:28-34, Jesus introduces a boundary-breaking ideal of love by, extraordinarily, linking Deuteronomy 6:4-5 with Leviticus 19:18 to form the double commandment of love as a principle of prophetic discipleship and wellspring of the most loving act of grace.⁴ Today's gospel reminds us that for Jesus, the command to love God with all one's heart, and with all one's soul, and with all one's strength is an 'impossible possibility,' only possible by faith. A closer look, this ideal of love may seem easier to fulfil as it appears to place the demand to love as dependent on one's effort. But when the love of God is reinforced by the demand to love one's neighbour as oneself, as found in Leviticus 19:18, the ideal of love points to a completely different realm. It becomes more difficult to understand and apprehend as, by being prophetic, it takes us back to the critique and correction of the very prevailing practices of love in the society of Jesus' day. Indeed, Jesus wins the approval of the scribe because his theological teaching on the Torah takes the scribe to a whole new realm in the understanding and interpretation of the law of Moses. In the new realm, the fulfilment of God's love ceases to be a matter of personal devotion to be a matter of mutual concern and empathy towards the neighbour, where loving God cannot be possible without considering the concerns of one's neighbour.

In the boundary-breaking nature of Jesus' ministry, boundaries are broken, the two love commandments become mutually interdependent, one cannot be fulfilled without the other, human solidarity becomes a wellspring of grace. Conscious of the God of grace, Jesus' use of scriptures was extraordinary and new to the hearers of his day, it pointed to the completely new realm in the use of Torah. Certain of the presence and power of this gracious God in history, Jesus insisted that, contrary to the prevailing model in Judaism, in the double commandment, the recitation and interpretation of scriptures could not be divorced from the social and spiritual challenges of the time. We can take lessons from Jesus' love, where acting in solidarity and empathy towards one's neighbour is 'much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.' Jesus' model may help us to realise that ministry is about horizontalizing human relationships, Jesus' boundary-breaking ministry insists that the road that leads to grace passes through the neighbour, the wellspring of grace. In Christian discipleship, embracing the neighbour is the most loving act of grace.

The Greatest commandment as the most loving act of grace

Where one sees God as defining principle of love, Jesus sees the neighbour. In her reading of the story, Karoline Lewis, an American Lutheran theologian, and minister, gives us the vocabulary we need to speak about neighbourly love in the context of one's pastoral duties at the congregational level. Lewis insists that the commandment to love the neighbour as oneself rings all too true for those of us called to love to earn a living, love as a measure of ministry. In her experience, this is a hard-earned loving that sometimes does not come so easily. Whether it is a warning that questions our leadership or challenges our decisions, a warning that calls us out for not living up to pastoral expectations in the realm of faith, loving your neighbour may take on a whole different meaning in parish ministry, no matter how much we may try.⁵ Lewis seems to address some of our longings, loving the neighbour will always remain a gradual effort. If we could learn from the scribe's effort, who despite his committed achievement in fulfilling the demands of the kingdom, Jesus still saw him as not being there yet but equally not very far from the kingdom of God, we could quickly realize that the confidence in our ability to live this mark of faith is a matter of grace. No matter

⁴ Hays, Richard: *The Moral Vision of the New Testament. A contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics.* Continuum, T&T Clark London, 1996, p. 209.

⁵ Karoline Lewis is the Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

how higher our spirituality may soar, how tangible our petitions may be, we are consistently less than near in meeting the bar that Christ sets before us. Despite our prayers and longings, meeting the demands of the Kingdom will always remain a divine prerogative. There are no easy roads to grace, but the good news is that God in Christ has done the impossible to save us. God's love in Christ has unleashed the boundaries that make it impossible and difficult for the believer to realize the demands of the kingdom.

Despite our fears and shortcomings, this is a gracious God who always continues to make our way towards the kingdom possible. We cannot claim to be nearer, only God knows where each one of us is now. Christian discipleship will always remain a personal commitment. In the same way that the scribe expresses his approval to Jesus' teaching but still had to go extra-mile, by making the crucial step of committing himself to Jesus' demand. Whether he took the step or not we will never know. However, we can only do one thing, to start today to make a choice and renew our commitment to keep this double commandment and to reflect how well we may put it into practice. Making the first commandment second will always remain a challenging mission, is not something that we can do on our own. The good news is that as the American theologian and ethicist, Reinhold Niebuhr, once remarked, 'the demand to love the neighbour will always remain an impossible possibility,' having said this, Niebuhr also warned that 'we cannot overlook the cure of grace' in the sense that God will never give us a cross so heavy to bear without giving us the strength we need to carry it.⁶
Amen

⁶ Niebuhr, Reinhold: *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. Seabury, New York 1935(1979).