

## “NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM”

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark  
First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT  
November 1, 2015 – All Saints' Sunday – Communion*

Text: Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus 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.’<sup>1</sup> The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>2</sup> 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.



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<sup>1</sup>Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

<sup>2</sup>Leviticus 19:18.

It's been a busy week for this year's confirmation class. Last Sunday afternoon and evening, we served Sunday dinner to about a hundred guests at St Vincent de Paul in Middletown. Several of you in this room this morning prepared the main course—chicken tetrazini—while the confirmands and their families provided brownies for dessert. Serving a meal that helps the poorest of the poor in Middletown make it through the week is one of the ways in which this congregation expresses love of neighbor.

Last Friday evening, our confirmands and their mentors attended a Sabbath worship service at Congregation Beth Shalom Rodfe Zedek in Chester. (This congregation is part of the Reform tradition in Judaism; its long name reflects that it is a merger of two congregations, one on either side of the Connecticut River.) After the service we met with Rabbi Goldenberg, who answered questions and then showed us one of the Torah scrolls that is kept in the ark. Sabbath worship is one of the ways in which this Jewish congregation expresses love of God.

This morning, I've asked the confirmands to attend our Sunday morning worship services, here and at the Higganum church, which is one of the ways in which we Christians express love of God. After worship, we'll be meeting to talk about our recent experiences of love of neighbor and love of God, and to compare and contrast Reform Jewish and Protestant Christian approaches to worship.

On the first Sunday of the month, we, like many UCC congregations in Connecticut and elsewhere, gather for worship in what we call a Service of Word and Sacrament. We break bread together in the sacrament of communion, and we reflect together on the scripture reading for the day, as we are doing now. Worshipping together is one of the ways in which we express our love of God.

This morning's scripture reading, from the Gospel according to Mark, begins with a question from a scribe, a biblical scholar, about the Torah. This collection of sacred writings comprises the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. (The Torah scroll we saw on Friday evening, according to Rabbi Goldenberg, is a hundred years old. It is handwritten in Hebrew on parchment; it represents a full year's dedicated and detailed work by the scribe who copied it from another scroll.)

The scribe in today's reading, this biblical scholar, having seen that Jesus has answered his opponents skillfully, poses his persistent religious question to Jesus: what is the most important commandment, the foundational commandment, in the Torah? The scribe knows that there is a multitude of positive and negative commandments in these sacred writings. (The 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish scholar Maimonides determined that there are 613 commandments in the Torah.)

The scribe knows that some of these commandments are more important than others. But he wants to know: of all these inspired commandments, which is the most important one, the one that is the foundation for all the rest? Jesus, who is skilled in the Torah and its interpretation, answers with two direct quotations from the Torah: 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; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Most of the time in the Gospels, when a scribe or a Pharisee or a Sadducee or a chief priest asks Jesus a question, they're not really looking for an answer. Instead, they're looking for an opportunity to trip him up or to entrap him. As we say in our current political parlance, they're hoping to create a "gotcha" moment, where Jesus says or does something that will cast doubt on his authority or his authenticity.

The scribe in today's story, however, does not seem interested in entrapping Jesus. Rather, he "raises his question in a spirit of respect and receptivity." He genuinely wants to know what Jesus has to say about "a question that was common among the rabbis: Which of the 613 commandments of the Torah (248 positive commands and 365 prohibitions) is first and foremost? He could be asking "which commandment is of interpretive priority in helping us to understand all others," or he could be asking "which is most important to fulfill before all others," but in either case, his question "goes to the very heart of religious faith."<sup>3</sup>

The first part of Jesus' answer to the scribe's question is a direct quotation from scripture, the verse that all Jews recite at the beginning of every day. '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.'<sup>4</sup> This is called the "Shema," from the first word of this verse in Hebrew: Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.

The second part of Jesus' answer is also a direct quotation from scripture, from a verse in Leviticus that many rabbis pointed to as the first and foremost commandment of the moral law: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>5</sup> Paul writes in Galatians: For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall **love your neighbor** as yourself."<sup>6</sup>

In bringing these two commandments together as equally important, Jesus is teaching that love of God and love of neighbor are equal and inseparable. Or, as the First Letter of John in the New Testament puts it, "those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot **love God whom** they have not seen."<sup>7</sup>

What did Jesus' answer mean to the scribe? First of all, the scribe agreed with Jesus that there is no other commandment greater than the two commandments about loving God and neighbor. And then he took this answer a step further: loving God and neighbor are more important than all the religious rituals involving sacrifice.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 213.

<sup>4</sup>Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

<sup>5</sup>Leviticus 19:18.

<sup>6</sup>Galatians 5:14.

<sup>7</sup>I John 4:20.

What does this conversation between Jesus and a biblical scholar have to say to us? That our religious rituals and our religious practices need to be infused with love of God and love of neighbor. That at the very heart of religious faith, for Jews and Christians alike, is the practice of loving God and neighbor. We love God and neighbor when we worship together, especially when our worship is inclusive, when all are welcomed to the Lord's table on a communion Sunday. We love God and neighbor when we serve a Sunday dinner at St Vincent de Paul in Middletown or Harvest House in East Haddam.

We Protestant Christians are pretty good at loving God and neighbor when we bake bread and sell it and give the proceeds to the Haddam emergency fuel fund. We're pretty good at loving God and neighbor when we provide help for people who are hungry, whether by preparing and serving a hot meal, or by participating in a hunger walk to raise funds for Church World Service.

Our growing edge in today's world has to do with how we experience love of God and neighbor in worship. In today's world—where it sometimes seems as if everyone is pursuing his or her own private spirituality, where, especially in New England, religious institutions like the church no longer seem relevant or significant to most people in our communities—in today's world, our worship time together needs to recapture a sense of the mystery, the awe, the amazing grace of God. Annie Dillard put it this way in her 1982 book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? ... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares: they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake and someday take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.”<sup>8</sup>

If you've ever been a parent, or once upon a time were a child, you surely have heard and even asked one of life's most persistent questions: are we there yet? Stuck in a car stuck in traffic on the way to Cape Cod on a sunny summer Saturday morning, or navigating an unknown country road late at night by headlights, or on a long straight stretch of interstate highway: are we there yet?

The scribe in today's biblical text has a different persistent question: which commandment is the first of all? Although he isn't asking directly whether he's there yet, Jesus says to him at the conclusion of the conversation, “you're almost there.” You are not far from the kingdom of God.

The good news for us from this scribe's conversation with Jesus—which is also in some ways our conversation with Jesus—is that in our practices of loving God and neighbor, we are not far from the kingdom of God. But we're not quite there yet. We need to recapture a sense of wonder and awe and majesty and mystery and mercy in our love of God. We need to open ourselves to the possibility that “the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.”

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<sup>8</sup>Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 40. Cited in Eugene H. Peterson, “Annie Dillard: With Her Eyes Open” (*Theology Today* - 43:2 - July 1986). Online at <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1986/v43-2-article3.htm>.