

### **Mark 12:28-34**

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. (*Also Ruth 1:1-18*)

### **“Living the Shema”**

Last Tuesday I was over at St. Mary’s Parish Center as an attendee of the Livingston County Jail Ministry Clergy Day. The theme for the day was “Preventative Measures for Youth” and the new mentoring program for inmates ages 16 to 21 was highlighted. The Rev. Jeff Carter, a guest speaker who was the former senior chaplain at Attica Correctional Facility, told us a story about “Grandma.” Shortly after Rev. Carter began his ministry a woman, who would later come to be known by all the inmates and all the staff as Grandma, began to come to the Wednesday evening Bible Study and worship. Attica is a closed down maximum security prison system for the most part. Even the volunteers Rev. Carter had coming to visit inmates were intimidated by the guards. But Grandma remained resolute and dignified and came week after week.

The interesting thing about Grandma was that she didn’t speak much during worship or the Bible study. She was not a Bible teacher or a gifted counselor. Nor was she skilled in prison ministry. Every week Grandma simply showed up. She came to worship and to stand with those in need, to understand their place and sympathize with them. She was there on Wednesday evenings more regularly than Rev. Carter. Grandma loved God and neighbor enough to risk what was unknown. Her risk changed the prison system at Attica. The men felt like she was family after awhile; the most loving family some of them had ever known. The guards came to regard her with respect and a gentleness rarely seen. Grandma personified love of God and neighbor. Her presence carried compassionate humanity to the men and guards.

Of all the ways that we could define ourselves, whether by political party, gender, athletic or academic achievement, economic standing, family birth order, or by ethnicity, Jesus taught that the defining marker of those who follow the one true God is a life lived according to these words:<sup>1</sup> ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might’ (Deut. 6:4) and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev. 19:18). There is no commandment greater than these.’

There is no better way of being human in relation to God! Shema means “hear” or “listen” and the people hear so they can learn God’s will and then live accordingly.

The scribe asks Jesus for one commandment, he gets two bound together in return. Love of God through worship alone cannot fulfill the command. Jesus appends the second command, as did Israel’s Rabbis before him, by citing Leviticus 19:18. There love of neighbor meant that Israel could not exploit the less powerful and the stranger in its midst! Love of neighbor in the Levitical context is both an individual and communal call.

It's justice in the gates for the poor and unprotected and individual households being generous to those in need. It's the solo acts like those of the Good Samaritan and the whole community's call to provide a jubilee year for to set free the oppressed!

In Mark the scribes are part of the temple system and their job was to interpret the scriptures. "The wise (scribe)...cannot get closer to God's reign by intellectual sparring with Jesus. Though wiser than his colleagues, the scribe is not "wise" enough to recognize that he was part of a religious system in the temple"<sup>2</sup> that oppressed instead of liberated his neighbors. "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Jesus told him. What does that mean? Agreeing with Jesus alone does not show forth God's reign. "Not far"—it's like wanting to train for a marathon, but choosing to stand by as a spectator instead of running because you just can't commit to the training. Not far from the kingdom of God leaves us in spectator status, watching others follow their beliefs as we stand aside and miss the joys and challenges of living within God's reign.

Jesus was saying to the scribe—yes, you get it! You know practicing love of God and love of neighbor is more important than sacrifices in the temple. Now live what you believe.

The greatest commandment is love. We know we can't just talk about love as a theory. Words aren't enough if our actions disprove them. In the biblical understanding "Love, is more than a feeling. It finds expression in concrete acts and on a corporate level takes on the character of justice, passion, avid commitment, zeal."<sup>3</sup> Knowing the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, shapes every aspect of our day from rising to lying down to sleep! From how we converse with others to what we teach the children in our midst. When people enter our house, they'll know biblical hospitality if we practice it. They'll sense our love for others if we engage in practices of prayer that replace fear of others with love.

In the time of the Judges, Ruth lived out her love of God and neighbor. She was socially and economically weak. She had no power! If you continue to read Ruth this week you'll find that her devotion and loyalty to Naomi helped her to stand out among the women that work in Boaz's fields. Through her story that we do not need power or money or prestige or even to know the scriptures back and forth to love God and neighbor—Ruth didn't have any of this. She practiced risky love, putting her mother-in-law before herself. "She stands with one in need and sets a new history in motion for the two women. She was willing to leave the world as she knew it behind for the world that God will show her."<sup>4</sup> Her love thwarted a system that would have left Naomi destitute.

"About a century after Mark wrote, the early Christians had a well-known and well-deserved reputation for social generosity that built bridges of community rather than walls of separation. Tertullian in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., wrote, 'Our care for the derelict and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy . . . See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other.'<sup>5</sup> Early Christians went to prostitutes, to prisoners, to widows, to orphans, to people of other faiths, to provide food, protection and shelter. They knew love of God and neighbor to be a radical, boundary-breaking call upon their lives. Unfortunately when the church became part of the Roman Empire we lost some of our zest for love of God and neighbor. We began to feel more triumphal in our beliefs and the rightness of our ways, than we were concerned with challenging whatever society we live in by loving God and neighbor.

Last week I told you a story about the author Timothy Tyson from his book *Blood Done Sign My Name*.<sup>6</sup> This week I want to tell you a bit about his father Vernon Tyson who was a Free Methodist minister in North Carolina who believed in civil rights for all, desegregation, and racial equality. In the late 1960s Rev. Tyson took Timothy's older brother and him to view an evening KKK rally from a hill close enough to see, but far enough away not to be seen. Rev. Tyson wanted to show his sons what hate looked like and what evil did to people. All three sat silently in the car and watched clansmen hood while their families watched. They watched hate speeches and saw the clansmen set a cross on fire. On the way back to their home the Tyson's sang together the song we will sing in a few minutes as our Family Sunday Hymn. "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world!"

Rev. Tyson sought not only to teach his children what is wrong by example of watching the Klansmen, but also what is right. The Tyson boys left knowing they were somehow called to love all God's children; even those who hate others.

Love of God and neighbor is the most challenging commandment. That is why it is first. May God empower us to hear and live the Shema each day. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20061030JJ.shtml>, Dan Clendenin.

<sup>2</sup> Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (WKJP: Louisville, 2002) 197.

<sup>3</sup> *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B.* (574-5)

<sup>4</sup> *Preaching Through the Christian Year: B.* (455-6)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20061030JJ.shtml>, Dan Clendenin.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy B. Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name* (Three Rivers Press: NY, 2004).