

“Life-long Learning”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for November 4th 2018 (24th Sunday after Pentecost/All Saints Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Mark 12: 28-34

It can be a special challenge, I think: a special challenge when a scripture passage is as familiar as this one tends to be. Combining, as it does, the two most central Old Testament commandments...

...love of God and love of neighbour...

...combining those twin commandments in one succinct formulation, makes this text one of the most central found anywhere in scripture: especially in a denomination such as the United Church of Canada, one which tends to emphasize precisely that aspect of discipleship embodied in these two familiar commandments. And yet their very familiarity does pose special challenges. Special challenges, of course, to the preacher seeking to speak a word that is both fresh and faithful. Special challenges, however, to **all** people of faith: those seeking to live-love with passion and imagination, even when they are old enough to realize that living-love is not always the easiest of things to do. Which is probably why...

...probably why a particular line in this morning’s text jumped out at me: jumped out at me in a way it has never done in the past. Before I get to that, however....

...before I get to that, permit me to comment on a few other aspects of this morning’s reading, aspects that are worth taking the time to notice.

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Let’s begin by recognizing that this brief text represents a very **sweet** moment...a **sweet** moment in the midst of a portion of Mark’s Gospel that is otherwise filled with conflict. Last Sunday we read the story of Blind Bartimaeus, a story which—as I pointed out at the time—is the final episode in Mark just prior to Jesus’ short-lived triumph as he enters Jerusalem. What follows in much of chapters 11 and 12, is a series of escalating conflicts with a wide variety of religious leaders, culminating with a rather absurd scenario placed before Jesus by the Sadducees, the Jewish party that appears to have denied the resurrection from the dead. Jesus responds to that scenario in a way that resonates with one of the onlookers: a Scribe who was presumably a member not of the Sadducees but of their rivals, the Pharisees, whose views on such things as the resurrection from the dead were much closer to those of Jesus. At any rate...

...in response to his appreciation of Jesus’ way of handling the Sadducees question, this scribe offers **his** question not from a place of hostility, not as a way of

setting a trap for Jesus, but because he seems genuinely curious to hear what Jesus is going to say. And so he asks the most basic question one Jew could put to a Jewish teacher: “*Which commandment...which commandment is the most important of all!*”

Nor should we overlook the fact that Jesus’ responds to that question in a thoroughly Jewish way, citing two key portions of scripture. First, he turns to the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, and quotes a portion of scripture that observant Jews recite daily. Known as the “Sh’ma”, it begins with familiar words that affirm the primacy of God. *Sh’ma Yisrael, Adonai Elohainu, Adonai, Echad...* meaning: *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One...* but continues by affirming Israel’s vocation and by extension our vocation not only to “affirm” the oneness of God, but to *love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul and with all of your mind and with all your strength.*ⁱ That, for Jesus, is the first great commandment...although it should be noted that Jesus, in his response, has added to the original commandment. Deuteronomy speaks of loving God with heart, soul and strength; Jesus adds the word mind...which, if nothing else, should remind us that “know-nothing” Christianity is not something of which anyone ought to be proud. On the contrary, the fact that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has inspired not only the work of brilliant philosophers and theologians, but also the work of leading figures in every intellectual dimension **including science**, is the thing that ought to make us proud. But I digress.

Having made the point that the first commandment involves our relationship with God, Jesus quickly makes the further point about our relationship to other human beings. “*The second [commandment] is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.’*” And here it needs to be said...

...it needs to be said loudly and clearly, that this particular formulation opens up some pretty dangerous terrain for us preachers. After all: Jesus says we need to love our neighbour, and I can easily imagine that it is my job—on a morning such as this—to ride whichever hobby-horse (more than likely some political hobby-horse) I presently find myself riding, in order to assure you that **you** need to ride the same hobby-horse if you are going to be a truly loving person. I don’t want to go there this morning, in part because it seems terribly self-indulgent, but also because it is worth recalling the fact that we don’t need to guess as to the nature of neighbourly love Jesus would have had in mind. Just as the commandment to love God is drawn from Deuteronomy, the commandment to love neighbour is drawn from that most forbidding of Old Testament books, Leviticus: filled with obscure commandments regarding the offering of sacrifice in the ancient Jerusalem Temple. And yet...quite wonderfully, smack dab in the middle of Leviticus is this urgently important commandment about the love of neighbour.ⁱⁱ Better still, it is part and parcel of a small section of Leviticus in which aspects of neighbourly love are spelled out with remarkable clarity: such things as fair dealing in commerce, avoiding false witness against the neighbour, seeking justice inside and outside of the courtroom. Even such things as making sure that some of the harvest is left in the fields for the homeless and the landless: a provision we encountered this summer when we were reading the story of Naomi and Ruth, two homeless, landless widows who—if they were going to survive—needed to glean from

the fields of those with homes and land. At any rate: such practices—in ancient Israel and in contemporary Nanaimo—were the signs of neighbourly love. Not mere sentiment. Not mere kind words. But love lived...love lived in costly ways.

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Well. As noted earlier, there is an aspect of this morning's text of which I don't believe I have ever taken due note. It concerns the exchange that takes place **after** Jesus has answered the scribe's question. The scribe listens closely to Jesus' answer, and then he responds with a great deal of affection.

The scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. 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, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." That's how the scribe responds to Jesus...and I'll note in passing that it is so important to remember that not all of the Jewish religious leadership took offense at Christ! Nor did Christ take offense at all of **them**, richly illustrated by the way in which Jesus now responds to the scribe. *And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely...*

...when Jesus saw that he answered **wisely**...

...he said to him: "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

And yes: that formulation is what really jumped out at me this past week. You are **not far...not far...not far**...from the Kingdom of God. Which, if we apply a tiny bit of Aristotle-style logic to scripture, ought to tell us that his "not being **far**" from the Kingdom of God, entails the clear corollary that this scribe is not yet quite there: at least not yet! On his way. Getting closer. But not quite there.

And I must tell you: as soon as I pondered those words and the **implications** of those words, my heart skipped a beat, and I found myself recalling that this is indeed **our** "All Saints Sunday": a Sunday when many churches will move Thursday's November 1st celebration of All-Saints Day forward, so that we can gather together as Christians as part of our **Sunday** celebration, to recall not only those saints who have arrived at their destination, but those of us who hope and pray that we are indeed, "saints-in-training": those of whom it can be said, as it was said of that scribe of yore: you are "not far from the Kingdom of God." Not there yet, to be certain. Not yet those ready to boast in anything other than in Christ...and yet those whose grounding in Christ justifies a quiet confidence that they are indeed "on the way", on **their** way. On their way as those who refuse to trust in the steadiness of their own hearts, the wisdom of their own minds, the substance of their own souls, or the strength of their own hands: but who are learning, one day at a time and one step at a time, to place their trust in the heart, mind, soul and strength of the God who came to us in Jesus.

And yes: that also explains the appropriateness of our gathering at this table. That the **only** Christian sacrament meant to be repeated over and over again...

...it doesn't much matter whether you count seven sacraments or only two, because either way the only one meant to be repeated over and over and over again, is the sacrament that brings us to a table: a table at which we are offered gifts of bread and cup. Gifts meant to feed, to nourish, to nurture. Gifts which, if nothing else, ought to stand as a reminder that we **are** still in training, that we are still "on the way", that we remain those who are **learning** what it means to love God with heart and mind, with soul and strength...that we remain those who are **learning** what it means to love even ourselves let alone love our neighbour as ourselves...that we are still, quite simply "works in progress", "saints in training", those who yearn—and who seek to deepen their yearning—for the coming of that day when we will have become the very people in whom God can and will delight to live forever.

"Bread of life, feed my soul,
as the presence of the Spirit makes me whole.
Bread of life, fill my heart,
with the grace and mercy you impart.

"Bread of life, help me live,
a life as pure and true as Jesus did.
Bread of life, help me see,
the boundless love of Christ, for you and me."ⁱⁱⁱ

May it be so! In Jesus' name! Amen!

ⁱ Deuteronomy 6: 4-8

ⁱⁱ Leviticus 19: 9-18

ⁱⁱⁱ From "Bread of Life, Feed My Soul", words and music by Stephen Spencer.