

Sermon: Milk & Honey

New North Church, Hingham

Steven Aucella

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Based on **Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34**

In a complicated, mixed-up world, today's readings are foundational to how we define ourselves as a faith community. In Moses' time, the faith community included everybody; today, we're not quite at 100% but people still gather at regular intervals to worship God and to hear God's word.

This is some old-time religion here, and I mean old: most of Deuteronomy was compiled at least 600 years before Jesus began his ministry, and we still do these things, we still talk about these things, we still keep God's commandments, because we believe it matters, because doing so enables us to live in peace.

If we start with Mark and work our way back, we learn (again) that context is everything. Since last week's reading, the lectionary has skipped over one conflict after another. After entering Jerusalem immediately after healing blind Bartimaeus, Jesus has disrupted the Temple marketplace; has had his authority questioned by the chief priests, scribes, and elders; has been tested by some Pharisees on the eternal subject of paying taxes; and has had his knowledge of Scripture and the power of God questioned. In a rapid-fire series of challenges, a concerted effort has been made to trap this Jesus of Nazareth with his own words.

It's almost as if Mark has been conditioning us to expect tense encounters. In the moments before today's passage, some Sadducees had been badgering Jesus about resurrection and one of the scribes came near to listen in. After hearing Jesus' answer and *seeing* – perceiving – that Jesus had answered well, the scribe waits his turn and then asks a perfectly reasonable question: Of the 613 commandments, which is the first of all?

As he often does, Jesus answers by quoting Scripture, first Deuteronomy and then Leviticus, making one commandment out of two, yet keeping a distinction between them. Neither does he allow us to consider either one as optional.

The first is the commandment that God charged Moses to teach the Israelites to observe diligently, to be fixed on the hand or arm so to be near one's heart; on one's head to be near one's mind; and to be written on the doorposts of our houses and on our gates. These words were meant to be recited to children, to be talked about at home or away, when you are lying down or standing up, and kept in your heart.

These words are important:

'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.'

This is the *Shema* prayer and it is called that simply because *Shema* means *Hear*. The prayer is recited every morning and every evening, on the Sabbath when the Torah is removed from the ark, and at end of life. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include a version of the *Shema* but with imprecise wording. Over time, as the audience became less Jewish, The Lord's Prayer replaced it in Christian liturgies, rituals, and private prayer.

God's first and greatest commandment calls on us to stop, listen, and hear: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone, whom we shall love with all our being. We are to love God because God first loved us.

Then Jesus quotes from Leviticus, adding love of neighbor as the second greatest commandment, and he intends it to mean love your neighbor even if your neighbor doesn't love you. 'Why would I do that?' you might ask. 'My neighbor's a jerk; I don't like him; he still has my lawnmower.' But God values us all and has love for us all. That's why. And then Jesus amps it up a bit: 'love your neighbor *as yourself*.'

What does self-love have to do with it? We're taught that pride is a sin. Isn't it a form of idolatry? Maybe Jesus says this to make it a teachable moment, so to speak, and maybe the lesson is, that only by loving ourselves can we learn how to love our neighbor. If we knew what makes *us* tick, makes *us* happy, then we could better understand others.

Jesus also adds that we are to love God with all our *mind*. The scribe agrees, for the first and only time in this Gospel, and so did Karl Barth, a Swiss Reformed theologian, who said we should *all* be theologians, that we should all think about and talk about God. The scribe goes so far as to say that what Jesus teaches is more important than religion, which prompts Jesus to say that the scribe is not far from God's kingdom. And after that, no one could think of anything more they could use to criticize Jesus.

Sadly, in the history of the world, love of God and love of neighbor are often the first two commandments that people abandon. In fact, every commandment has been broken at one time or another. People being people, as a species, we don't always do justly or walk humbly, and we're not always merciful.

By now, we are all aware of what happened at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh two Sabbaths ago. In a hate-fueled act of anti-Semitism, a man named Robert Bowers entered the synagogue during a service and shot and killed eleven people, wounding six others, simply because they were Jewish.

Anti-Semitism is nothing new in the world, and it's not unknown among Christians. In that sense, some of us are very far from God's kingdom. But after the Second World War ended, we thought we were through with it. Pittsburgh is the latest reminder that we have a demon among us. It also reminds us that love of neighbor goes hand in hand with love of God, and that if you have one, you have to have the other. On the other hand, we know plenty of people who follow no faith tradition and yet carry no hate in their heart for their fellow citizens. Anti-Semitism is a unique hatred against which we must be ever-vigilant.

Albert Einstein once said that each of us is only here on earth 'for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that we are here for the sake of each other.'

Jesus calls us to make a commitment to the well-being of others, including the neighbor who won't return our lawnmower. It seems like a simple thing, to live in peace with our neighbors, and most people manage to do it very well.

What makes the scribe in Mark's Gospel different from his peers is that he can perceive, he can hear and see the power of God at work in the world through Jesus, through discipleship and true worship, and through love.

The *Shema* prayer reminds us of the unity of one God in a world seemingly ruled by many diverse and damaging gods. When Jesus reminds us that we are to also love our neighbor as our self, he prompts us to wonder, to whom am I a neighbor?

So, let's leave it at this: Pray as if everything depended on God. Act as if everything depended on you. Amen.