

Sermon: The Greatest

New North Church, Hingham

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

Those of us of a certain age may remember a brash young boxer named Cassius Clay, from Louisville, Kentucky. On the verge of fighting the heavily favored Sonny Liston for the World Heavyweight title, he produced a poem about ‘the legend of Cassius Clay, the most beautiful fighter in the world today.’ He was only 21.

Cassius could make rhymes, he had wit, and possessed a big ego. In hindsight, though, everything he said in his poem was 100% on point. He beat Liston and a lot of others in his career, which was derailed for a time when he refused to serve in the Viet Nam War. He said “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Viet Cong.”¹ He also said that boxing is “just a job. Grass grows, birds fly, waves pound the sand. I beat people up.”

In his life, he was an activist, entertainer, poet, and philanthropist. Nicknamed The Greatest after the last line in his poem about ‘the legend of Cassius Clay,’ there is little doubt that he was right about that too.

But then you can say, well, what about Joe Louis or Rocky Marciano? Or Marvin Hagler? There’s always room for debate in these things. It can be healthy and informative to have discussions like this. Two or three people might get together to talk about their favorite boxer, or football team or baseball team, and come away with good feelings knowing that they could share an opinion with someone.

That may happen when the topic is sports or kittens or puppies, but when the conversation turns to politics or pizza or taxes, things can turn ugly fast. Even book group discussions can get heated sometimes and forget about talking about religion.

Think about how often we enter into a conversation with a chip on our shoulder. Before we even get started, we know where we stand and will remain unmoved no matter what. Engaging on social media is even worse. You can say the sky is blue and someone will rake you over the coals for it. We can say that that is human nature, that it’s baked into our DNA, and we wouldn’t be wrong, but it doesn’t always have to be that way.

Now let's see how Jesus handled a similar situation.

Context is everything, as we always like to point out. Matthew and Luke also include this story, but they tell it differently. Matthew (22:34-40) omits *strength* as part of the first commandment to love the Lord our God. In Luke (10:25-28), this story is the lead-in to the parable of the good Samaritan in response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" In both versions, Jesus is being tested, each time by a lawyer.

In Mark, Jesus is now teaching in the Temple having made the long walk from Galilee with his disciples. He began by teaching some parables and ended up fending off challenging questions about taxes and resurrection from the local religious types who wanted to test his authority.

But then something unusual happens: a discussion with no agenda between scribe and teacher. This scribe has been listening in, and when he *saw* that Jesus answered each question well, he decided to ask one of his own.

He's not trying to test Jesus or Mark would have said so. This scribe just wants to know Jesus' opinion: "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Given that there are 613 commandments, this is a valid question.

Moses said that "You shall love the LORD your God with all your *heart*, and with all your *soul*, and with all your *might*."

The Hebrew word for *soul*, *nepeš*, refers to our vitality of selfhood, that which makes us who we are; *might* meant our capacity to receive something and hold onto it. And *heart* meant a number of things, being both the seat of emotion and the innermost part of a person as well as our intellect or mind, all wrapped up in one word.

Now, even though Jesus is speaking to someone who knows Scripture, Mark's audience may not have known Hebrew. They did know Greek, though, so Jesus, in quoting Deuteronomy, both reaffirms Moses' teaching and also separates *heart* from *mind* as an aid to understanding, because they are two separate things in Greek.

It turns out that Jesus and the scribe agree. Throughout the Gospel, and in the immediate context of this story, we are conditioned to think that the scribe would be an opponent. Instead, he is one who listens to Jesus with an open mind and an open heart. This is not a matter of right and wrong opinions. It's a discussion that ends in agreement about something fundamentally important to our religious life.

First and foremost, Moses wanted us to remember. He wanted us to love God not just emotionally but rationally and intellectually as well. This commandment to love the LORD our God was so important, Moses wanted it wrapped around our arms and fixed upon our foreheads when we prayed the *Shema*; he wanted it written on our doorposts and gates so that we would see it in our comings and goings, that it might be a reminder for us and a blessing too, every day and always.

Jesus puts the two commandments together, connecting love of neighbor with love of God. In the context of Leviticus, your neighbor was your fellow Jew. In a first century context, your neighbor was the peasant next door. And in an early Christian context – Mark’s context – your neighbor was your fellow Christian, your new family, and family is everything. The concept of loving your neighbor has deep roots.

Diana Butler Bass, a writer, speaker, and sometime preacher and teacher, wrote recently that if you know only four verses from the entire New Testament, she recommends knowing these:²

- Love God & love your neighbor as yourself;
- Faith, hope, love: the greatest of these is love;
- There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male & female; and,
- In all things, give thanks.

And also, she said, “God is love.” On a two-way street, it’s no accident that love of God is the fullest measure of loyalty that we owe to the Lord. The entire purpose of being a Christian is to embody God’s love and justice, God’s compassion, in the world.

Cassius Clay, who subsequently became known as Muhammad Ali, once said of himself, “I *am* the greatest, I said that even before I knew I was.” And so it is with these commandments: they were the greatest before God revealed them to Moses; they were the greatest before we ever heard of them; they have always been the greatest.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God *and obey it!*” (11:28). If we only keep these few things in our hearts and minds, everything else will take care of itself.

Amen.

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¹ <http://www.ianfriedman.com/?p=284>, accessed 28 October 2021.

² <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/8-theses-on-the-cottage-door>, accessed 29 October 2021.