

Mark 12:28-34 (CEB)

<sup>28</sup> One of the legal experts heard their dispute and saw how well Jesus answered them. He came over and asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?"

<sup>29</sup> Jesus replied, "The most important one is *Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord,* <sup>30</sup> *and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength.* <sup>31</sup> The second is this, *You will love your neighbor as yourself.* No other commandment is greater than these."

<sup>32</sup> The legal expert said to him, "Well said, Teacher. You have truthfully said that God is one and there is no other besides him. <sup>33</sup> And to love God with all of the heart, a full understanding, and all of one's strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much more important than all kinds of entirely burned offerings and sacrifices."

<sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he had answered with wisdom, he said to him, "You aren't far from God's kingdom." After that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

"It Seems to Always Come Back to Love"  
Mark 12:28-34; Psalm 146

Our nation has a lot of stupid laws! For example, in North Dakota, "Beer and pretzels cannot be served at the same time in any bar or restaurant." In Virginia you can be arrested for "carrying an ice cream cone in your pocket." In Alaska, "It is illegal to push a live moose out of a moving airplane." In Florida, "If an elephant is left tied to a parking meter, the parking fee has to be paid just as it would if it was a vehicle." And if not the most bizarre, then certainly the most obvious; In Alabama, "It is illegal for a driver to be blindfolded while driving a vehicle." But did you know that it is illegal to walk down Main Street in Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, Canada, with your shoes untied? You can't make this stuff up!

Most laws trace their beginnings to a need to protect someone from something. Maybe 50 years ago, someone was minding his own business outside Nome, Alaska, when he was killed by a moose falling from the sky, and lawmakers vowed that it would never happen again.

Today, travelers can no longer bring more than two ounces of shampoo, toothpaste, or shaving cream onto a commercial aircraft because they might be concocting a bomb. Fifty years from now, that might seem as silly as all the other laws listed above. That's the thing about laws named earlier. At one time, they made perfect sense.

So, when one considers the laws of first-century Israel, we must cut them some slack. For example, when we read that we should "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy," we wonder why the Jews could not even bandage an injured arm, or assist a woman in labor, or rescue someone who had fallen in a well on the Sabbath. Why can't Jews eat a cheeseburger (because mixing meat and dairy is outlawed), and why are certain foods considered "edible" if a rabbi supervised their processing? Please, I am not mocking these laws; I just don't entirely understand why they were created in the first place.

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus is asked about the law and he brings it back to love.

A scribe approaches Jesus with a question about priorities, which is the greatest commandment? He's been listening to some of his colleagues trying to trap Jesus into saying something dangerous or inconsistent.

This teacher knows God's laws from the Bible, the whole list of them. Indeed, religious leaders at the time of Jesus had identified 613 different divine laws in the Bible, 248 that were positive, 365 that were negative. They agreed that some laws like "thou shalt not kill" were heavier and weightier than the lighter ones like "you shall not eat an eagle or a vulture." But with a long list of commandments, with such a long list of do's and don'ts, where should a person begin?

In Jesus' answer, he picks out two from the 613 possibilities. He is asked for one but Jesus gives him two (isn't that just like Jesus?) He takes the well-known "shema" of the Old Testament, which the scribe would know very, very well.

He would know it for every day as he left his home, he would touch the doorsill and recite "Hear O Israel, love God with all you have." Then Jesus marries the shema to the one in Leviticus 19:18 about loving one's neighbor. "Love God above all," he says.

"Love God with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole mind, and all your strength." Then he goes on, "And the second greatest commandment is love your neighbor as yourself, those two. That's it." It seems to always come back to love.

Love that lifts up. Jesus' love is the love that gives life. Jesus' love is one of honor to the One God, respect to the Creator, bowing to the Sovereign God. And that love can be offered out to neighbor and stranger and foreigner and brother and sister throughout the whole world.

Rather than seeing one another as stereotypical opponents in religious debate, this scribe and Jesus overcame division and found that they shared a lot. Jesus did not see him as a scribe seeking power or points. The scribe did not see Jesus as a threat to his station in life.

They saw each other as brother, respectable, honorable, both children of God. Of the nineteen references to scribes in the Gospel of Mark, this one is alone in that regard. The other gospels tell this story with the questioner as a lawyer seeking to test Jesus, but the Mark's story is the most refreshing.

His question was appropriate to Judaism's continued reflection upon its tradition and faith in the effort to keep perspective and not to stray from the center. Jesus centers us in love- Love of God, love of neighbor and love of self. It seems to always come back to love.

They found a common theme of love running deep in the Old Testament being lived out in the New Testament. It seems like love brought them together unlike other religious arguments: Whose wife will the widow be in the resurrection? Should we pay taxes to the Emperor? Who sinned for this boy to be blind? These are questions raised trying to trick Jesus and make him stumble.

There is an evil spirit behind their plot. But this scribe seeks the core of Jesus' belief. And when Jesus speaks - it seems to always come back to love.

What was that song of the sixties? "What the world needs now is Love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of." Jesus cuts to the heart of the faith. The focal point of laws and rituals and relationships is love.

What if we were to focus on loving God? What if we were to focus on a love that is inclusive, a love that is radical, a love that is non-judgmental, a love that is forgiving, a love that is risk taking and a love that is bold? What a world of difference that love would make.

Verse 34 tells us Jesus says that the scribe "is not far from the kingdom of God." For Mark, the kingdom is following Jesus on the way and all the way to the cross. The kingdom of God is not agreeing on the right answers or having the right beliefs.

It is more than saying the right prayer, or sacrificing the right animal, or eating the right food, or following all the do's and don'ts. 6

It is rather living, doing, relating, and being in ways that the love of God and love of neighbor inspire, inform, and shape our whole lives here and now.

What if we, like our Jewish brothers and sisters, begin each day as we walk out our front door reminding ourselves by shouting to the world the shema, "Hear O World, I shall love the Lord my God with all my heart, and with all my soul, and with all my mind, and with all my strength. And I shall love my neighbor as myself. This is my solemn vow." What if we let it all come back to love?

What if we daily remind ourselves that in every chore, every task, every encounter, every disagreement, every decision we make that the love of God and the love of neighbor reign supreme. What a world of difference that would make! What a world... what a difference... what love.

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