

It's All About Love
Mark 12:28-34
November 4, 2018 – All Saints Sunday

The local temple officials were involved in a dispute. I've stated before that I don't believe that all the Jewish leadership of the first century were necessary evil people; but they were overly legalistic. To the temple leaders of the first century, the most important thing in all the world was following every letter of Torah absolutely perfectly, regardless of the consequences. And so, one of the officials who obviously had a great deal of respect for Jesus asked the question: "Which commandment is the most important of all?"

Now, twenty-first century Christians hear that word "commandment" and they immediately think of that portion of scripture that is formally known as the Decalogue. You know it as "The Ten Commandments"; but that's not what our legal expert is talking about. Remember what I just said of following every letter of Torah? There are 613 Commandments in Torah. And you thought, back when you were in Sunday School, that it was unreasonable to be asked to memorize ten. Imagine 613. They range from how to prepare your food, to proper social and sexual relations, how to treat your animals and your slaves, how to offer sacrifices and other methods of worship, and the list goes on. 613 Commandments, and this person wants to know which is the most important.

I'm kinda' surprised that Jesus answered the question so directly. It's more like Jesus to tell a parable and then pose the question back to the inquirer. But maybe, just maybe, this question is so important that Jesus did not want to leave any doubt as to the answer. And so, he cites what is the first of what we call "The Great Commandments." It's from Deuteronomy 6:4 – "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." Jew's call it *The Shama*. *Shama* is simply the Hebrew word for "Hear," and this is the most important commandment not only for Christians but also for contemporary Jews. It is this *shama* that is fastened in little vessels to the doors posts of Jewish homes. Most Jews simply have it on their outside doors; but I spent three years in the early 2000's studying Hebrew at a Jewish College; and this *Shama* in what is called a *Mezuzah* was on every door – the outside doors, the office doors, the classroom doors, even the doors to the restrooms. And a good Jew, when passing through those doors will reach up and touch the *Mezuzah* – a constant reminder of that commandment to love God at all times and in all places. I don't have a *Mezuzah* in my home, but I need to say that I like the tradition. What could be more important than to return the great love that God has for us back to God?

But Jesus doesn't leave things here. Remember, he was only asked which commandment is first of all. But he goes on to say that the second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (It comes from Leviticus 19:18.) Now, I've preached before that there are two commandments here: "You shall love your neighbor" and "You shall love yourself." Indeed, all too often, we are not good at loving ourselves. But that's a whole 'nother sermon. I have also told you before, if we love God, we must, hear that we *must* love our neighbor; for our neighbor is a child of God. Our neighbor is created in the image of God. Now that doesn't mean that we need to like our neighbor. There are a lot of people around that I can't picture being really close friends with. But I do believe that I am called, called by my Christian baptism to treat all people with love and care and respect.

I preached a few weeks ago about the poor and underprivileged. I've quoted Shakespeare: "There but for the grace of God go I." And I need to tell you, one of the biggest challenges of ministry is deciding how to share that love. When a person comes to the church seeking financial assistance, is it most loving to give them money, or is it most loving to withhold help and thereby encourage them to move toward self-sufficiency. And, of course, underlying that decision is always the question of whether they are telling me the truth about their situation. Friends, that is frequently not an easy decision; and it's one that I must make several times a month. Still, regardless of my decision, I try to express Christian love and caring; and I always pray for the person. Sometimes, I pray with them; sometimes not. But, I always pray for them. Regardless of their situation, they are a child of God.

You see, once again it's all about love: God's love for us; our love for God; our love for each other; our love for self. So today is All Saints Sunday. All Saints Day is November 1st, the day after all hallows eve; or what we now call Halloween. The All Saints tradition dates to long before the Reformation. As you probably know, the Catholic Church has a tradition of canonizing or "sainting" certain members of the denomination that the Vatican feels have provided exemplary service in the name of Christ. (Now, it's nowhere near that simple, but for now, I'll leave it at that.) However, to their credit, the church recognized that there are many people, unnamed saints but members of the church and saints all the same. So the church established All Saints Day as a time to recognize and remember these saints.

I need to tell you that, in conversation, I have referred to many of you as "one of our saints" and I tell you now, whether you are willing to claim the title or not, you are all "saints of the Church." I can't think of a single one of you who does not do their best to fulfill the Great Commandments. Sure, all of us sometimes fall short. We are human; and thankfully we have a loving and merciful God. But I tell you, "This is the body of saints."

Now, having said that, if we want to get technical, you can't be a saint until you die; and that's what today is all about. This is a day of celebration, as we remember and celebrate the lives, the work, the dedication, and the love of those who have gone before us. And so, in a few moments, I will invite you to come forward and light a candle in honor or memory of one or more of the saints in your life. Candles are indeed special in the life of the church, as Christ tells his saints, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matt 5:16) Indeed that light of God has shown in the saints of yesterday; it shows in the saints of today; and it will show in the saints of tomorrow. Thanks be to God for the church; and praise be to God for all the saints. Amen.

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