



LOVE WINS

October 31, 2021 | Mark 12:28-34

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It's so nice to be back with you all again, after being away for a short vacation. Most of you know by now, I suspect, that my idea of a vacation does not involve sitting still and relaxing – I rest best by doing different work, not no work at all. So I spent most of my time away outdoors, working and puttering around on the farm and in the garden. Other than getting away and seeing my family, the other great part about a break is the opportunity to think and reflect on things, in the absence of weekly demands. I have always done my best thinking when I'm doing something else – driving the car, folding laundry, a hobby, washing the dishes – busy my hands, and my brain relaxes and usually churns out something! And it occurred to me, while I was doing other things, that it might be time to stop focusing only on our losses and start celebrating our wins, too.

Regardless of our personal experience of it, not one of us would deny that 2020 and 2021 have been difficult years, because of the pandemic. If our current provincial predictions are correct and the plan works out the way it's supposed to, it'll be a full two years – March 2022 –by the time it's safe to lift all our public health measures; it'll take longer than that, I expect, to settle into a new normal for our society and longer still to recover emotionally and psychologically, to fully resolve the consequences of this unrelentingly challenging time. We did not expect any of this, back in March 2020, when we temporarily suspended our worship and work for the first time, and the whole world stood still. And I wonder if any of you have, like me, been on an unplanned, unwilling journey of self-discovery ever since.

During lockdown, along with my closets and cupboards, my life got abruptly de-cluttered, too, and while I wish it had happened for any other reason than a global crisis, that de-cluttering wasn't entirely a bad thing: finding out the difference between needs and wants, necessities and luxuries; finding out what is really valuable and what is mostly distraction.

The drive to over-complicate life and what constitutes successfully living it is not new. And de-cluttering was exactly what Jesus was doing in the conversation we read together today from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus' message that day was simple: love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and your neighbour as yourself.

Among contemporary churches seeking to clearly express what it means to be Christian, that message has been stripped back and made even simpler: love God and love others. It's the motto or the mission statement of countless churches these days, even among our neighbouring churches here in Sarnia: love God and love others. That's it. That's what we're supposed to do as followers of Jesus, as faithful men and women: love God, and love others.

There are four different books in the Bible that are called "gospels:" Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They are four different but complementary accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection. Each author gives the story a unique flavour, observing and writing and discussing from their own perspective and with their own emphasis. Together, they give us a rich and nuanced understanding of who Jesus was, what he did and why it matters, still today.

Mark is the oldest gospel, and the shortest; Matthew and Luke's authors used bits of Mark and then added their own writing, too, and John is very much its own book, with no copy-pasting from the other three. Now, given the fact that all four books are about the same Jesus and that three of them are connected in a literary sense, it's not surprising and is actually a good thing that we do get some repeated stories and ideas. But they are four different books by four different people with four very different slants on Jesus...and yet, the commandment to love God and love one another is found, in some fashion, in all four Gospels. That's how important it is – you couldn't write about Jesus without including it.

But for all that the people around Jesus seemed to find this commandment note-worthy and revolutionary, Jesus wasn't saying anything new.

He's repeating one of the oldest and most important phrases in the history of God's people, one that got prayed by the faithful every morning and every evening. The shema, this phrase first recorded in Deuteronomy, was the foundation of the relationship between God and God's people: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

Loving God is made a priority right from the beginning, and so was loving one's neighbour, a commandment given and unfolded in Leviticus, the book in the Old Testament that expands on God's laws.

In fact, most of the Bible is about doing one or the other of those two things – loving God and loving our neighbour – and how to do them well...or explaining how God's people were failing to do either one.

Those strange, Levitical instructions about haircuts and blended fabrics and shellfish? That's about how God's people could bodily express their love and respect for God in the ancient near east. All those endless and intricate instructions about worship? How to love God by worshipping meaningfully. Those sharp, biting criticisms about over-taxation and a justice system that can be bribed? Failing to love our neighbour as ourselves. Ancient 6000-year-old laws about supporting the vulnerable members of society, those without family and the social safety net that it provides? Loving our neighbour the way God commands us .

This short conversation between Jesus and the scribe is a brief and rather friendly interlude in a stretch of the gospel filled with conflict and frustration and a complete failure to see eye-to-eye on anything. In the timeline of Jesus' life, it falls after Palm Sunday and his triumphal and politically-charged entry into Jerusalem. At this moment, Jesus is in the midst of a series of question-and-answer conversations with the Jewish religious authorities. They are asking Jesus deliberately difficult and sneaky question about how to apply God's laws to specific situations, from taxation while living under Roman occupation to re-marriage and whose wife a woman would be in the next life if she'd had more than one legal husband...like really awful, hot-button topics to try and mess with Jesus and get him in trouble.

Jesus keeps responding with parables and thoughtful answers, not missing a beat. But the religious leaders weren't getting what Jesus was saying, for the most part, instead seeing Jesus as a dangerous radical attacking their authority. Over the millennia since God first spoke to his people through prophets like Moses, a set of situational rules had been developed by the religious leadership to help God's people easily apply God's law to every possible scenario they might encounter.

Unlike what we just did, taking in the guiding principles of love God, love your neighbour, and seeing how the rules point toward that, they'd taken the approach of focusing on brainstorming every possible situation that a person could find themselves in, and making a law about it. There were literally several hundred laws by that point, and the foundation of those laws, the purpose and the bigger ideas they were intended to communicate about God, that had gotten rather lost.

Seemingly oblivious to the conflict between his colleagues and Jesus, this scribe asks Jesus his question and listens to the answer. And the scribe agreed with Jesus: loving God, heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbours as ourselves are the most important things we can do as faithful people.

What Jesus does, in that moment when the scribe comes up and asks him which is the greatest commandment and Jesus gives this answer, what Jesus does is he restates things that a good Jewish person of that time and place already knew. But Jesus also does two things that are new here. First of all, he adds a word.

The original shema said to love God with all our heart and soul and strength; Jesus adds our minds, too, setting the last piece of the human puzzle into place. The heart was thought to be the seat of our spiritual life; the soul referred to our desires and emotions; and strength is our real, physical capacity to take action. The mind rounds the whole thing out and includes the final piece of a human being: our understanding and our intelligence. We are to love God with our whole being; Jesus names everything that makes us human as parts of us that are capable of loving God.

The second new thing that Jesus does is link the two loves together: loving God and loving our neighbour. Two different actions that are inextricably linked. No one would have been surprised to hear Jesus say that loving God with our whole being was the first and greatest commandment. But tacking on love of neighbour as part two of the great commandment? Let's think about that for a moment. There are other commandments that Jesus might have added here, instead. Something from the ten commandments, perhaps, about not putting other gods – or other priorities – before God, or not misrepresenting God's name to others, or not stealing from people.

Although if we think about our guiding principles of love God and love others again – not putting other gods first or misrepresenting God kind of fall under the love God with your whole being clause, and stealing from your neighbour is not really loving them, is it.

But Jesus could also have said something about worshipping God – we know that's important, and we know how often God's people got worship wrong, whether in the Old Testament with its intricacies of burnt offerings and prayers that so easily became empty rituals that sustained abusive power structures, or the New Testament's troubles with turning the Lord's Supper into a feast for the wealthy that excluded the poor.

So...maybe Jesus was on to something, linking love of God and love of neighbour. Maybe we need both to get it right. If we are “all in” when we love God, all the other pieces of our lives will fall into place around that centre; if we love God, we’ll be able to love our neighbour, love others, in a new and deeper way because God will grow and shape that love for others within us.

There are a couple of challenges that I can see, when it comes to this commandment, or pair of commandments. It can be very hard to love other people sometimes; it can be equally hard to let ourselves be loved, by our neighbour or by God.

We all know, I suspect, why it can be hard to love others, from time to time. We don’t always see eye-to-eye with one another on everything. In times of great stress, like the last year and a half, the tension of differing opinions and beliefs can escalate into tremendous frustration, even conflict, and a real sense of painful difference between us, whether in our personal relationships, or among groups of people in society. And we have this commandment to love one another, and we have no idea how we’re supposed to love someone who maybe doesn’t want anything to do with us, or who makes it very hard to feel anything like love, because we’re experiencing so much hurt and anger instead.

That is why Jesus says, love God first. Build that relationship with God, let God love us and love God back, with all we’ve got.

When we love God with our whole being, we are connecting with a love that is powerful, unexplainable and grace-filled. When we love God, we are loving a God whose love created the world and each of us, whose love, expressed in Jesus, made real and powerful by the Cross, triumphed over evil and hate, conflict and division, suffering and pain, even death itself.

God’s love transforms and heals, mends and makes new; when you love God first, you can believe, even in the midst of challenge and conflict and change, that love will always win over loss.

All of that is very hopeful and inspiring and completely true; it’s also kind of large-scale and complex, and Jesus was trying to de-clutter, to de-complexify what it means to follow him to God, giving us a strong and simple foundation that we could be absolutely sure about.

So knowing the larger story, the permanent fix, the big win of God's love present in the world, yet in the spirit of what Jesus was trying to do, let's think for a moment about when God's love won right here at St. Andrew's through the losses and uncertainty of the past year and a half.

Love won when we locked the doors on March 15 2020, not knowing when we'd be back to normal, knowing it was the right thing to do, to keep everyone safe. Love won on March 22 2020 and every lockdown Sunday since when you tuned in on TV or online and we kept worshipping God together. Love won and is still winning with every phone call to check in, every email and card and newsletter, that keeps you connected to one another.

Love won when we opened our doors again for worship, and love won when each of you came back to church for the first time after lockdown, and love will win again as more and more of us feel safe to gather together.

Love wins with every envelope and online donation given to keep our ministry and mission alive and at work in our community. Love wins with every bag of groceries donated, with every food and clothing drive we've had, each one more successful than the last. Love wins with every pot of soup or stew made, with every meal picked up at the kitchen door, with every card sent to our nursing and retirement home neighbours, with every lunch made for our neighbours at the Inn of the Good Shepherd.

In a year and a half where loss and fear has re-shaped the world around us, often in not very good ways, here at St. Andrew's, week-by-week, Sunday by Sunday, God's love won and keeps winning.

I hope that we keep being a church where God's love wins. I think we can be; and what we have to do is simple: love God, and then love others. Thanks be to God! Amen.