

Worship Service for October 31st: 23rd Sunday after Pentecost - Reformation Sunday

- **Old Testament:** Ruth 1:1-18
- **New Testament:** Mark 12:28-34
- **Psalms:** Psalm 146

Announcements:

- **Wednesday November 3rd:** Bible Studies Acts 1 in St. George's P. C at 7pm.
- **Sunday November 7th:** Remembrance Day Service
- **Sunday November 21st:** 4-H Sunday Service

Sermon Title: The Sacrifice of Love.

Last week we experienced the healing of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10 and today we have read a text which is familiar to most or all of us. It's Jesus' teaching on which commandment is the first or greatest in Mark 12. We are following the lectionary readings, and this is a way that the church uses to divide Scripture so that throughout the multi-year cycle Christians gain knowledge of most of the passages in the Bible. This week we have a little jump from Mark 10 to Mark 12:28-34. If we remember well, all through our Mark readings we have been informed that Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. Mark 11 describes Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and that is a passage we celebrate on Palm Sunday reasons why the lectionary jumps over that passage to bring us to Mark 12.

In Mark 12 Jesus is finally in Jerusalem and has been teaching through the passages that we have jumped. And what is happening is that the Jewish leaders who are the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Scribes have been either testing Jesus or trying to trap him with their questions. In Mark 12:13-17 some Pharisees and Herodians engage Jesus. These people are members of the Jewish sects who accepted Roman occupation. The Pharisees believed that the Roman occupation of Israel was divine retribution while the Herodians who were people who supported king Herod liked the Roman occupation because it was politically an advantage for them. These partisans come to Jesus asking him a question and from Mark 12:18-27, another group of leaders called the Sadducees ask about the resurrection because they don't believe in the resurrection.

And that brings us to our passage for today where another Scribe or teacher asks Jesus another question. One thing we should note about these parties is that each of them is trying to figure out where Jesus falls politically or theologically and this was in a time where the world was quite partisan. Each party wants to know which side Jesus is on.

When the Scribes come to Jesus, they want to know if the commandments could be summarized. This looks like a simple question, but his intention was to see if Jesus would teach that some commandments are more important than others. But Jesus in his infinite wisdom takes the commandments and connects them into two great commandments. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, your mind and your strength and love your neighbour as yourself. These two commandments already existed as part of the commandments and Jesus takes the two and connect them together. There is no other commandment that is greater than these two because all the other commandments hang in these two.

The thing that connects both of these commandments is love. Here Jesus was connecting a vertical love – the love of God with a horizontal love – the love for neighbour. We are not called to love just God, we have to love our neighbours too bringing to mind the passage that says if you claim to love God who you do not see and hate your neighbour whom you see, you are a liar, for you do not love God (1 John 4:20). We are also not called just to love our neighbour and not love God.

When Jesus answered the question, the Scribe replied *“You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”*

And Jesus responded and informed the Scribe that he was not far from the Kingdom of God. Jesus was telling the Scribe that “yes, you get it to a certain extent but not completely.” His response to Jesus was wise but he was not there yet. Why? The Scribe knew what to do and might have been doing it, but he did not trust in Jesus who was himself King and who is the way into the Kingdom of God. And we are told that after that no one dared to ask Jesus any more questions.

Jesus knew what the intentions of these people were when they asked him those questions and he refused to be pinned down by their different beliefs. Jesus belongs to a Kingdom that operates on his terms and values which is based on love. Jesus refuses to fit into the confines of their party lines.

Jesus is telling us today that Christianity is built on love – love for God and love for man. We might say that we have heard this a million times and that’s true. But maybe this word is coming to us because like the Scribe we are closer to the Kingdom of God, but we are not there yet. And so many times, like the Scribe, we try to drag Jesus into the confinement of our own party lines, of our own cultures and traditions, bringing up reasons why we cannot love others. But Jesus will not allow that. Jesus’ Kingdom operates on his terms and not by way of our affiliations.

For someone your question might be “how can I love God and love my neighbour?” In the gospel of Luke, when Jesus teaches them these commandments someone asks the question “who is my neighbour?” And Luke breaks it down with the story of the Good Samaritan. However, Mark does not do that – maybe he wants us to figure it out by ourselves or maybe he wants us to go to Jesus by ourselves and ask him how we can love our neighbours.

Mark seems to realise that the human tendency is to want to be given a law or rule to do which often ends up becoming an obstacle to the gospel. Perhaps Mark is hoping that we will take time to reflect on what we have been learning so far. Through the passages as we have been following Jesus, he has shown us how to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Our Psalm today gives us a little glimpse of that with few examples – those who execute justice for the oppressed, who give food to the hungry and the Lord who opens the eyes of the blind, who lifts up those who are bowed down, who watches over the strangers and upholds the orphan

and the widow. The lectionary also uses Ruth chapter 1 to show us what loving one's neighbour looks like. It is about making sacrifices especially when there is no benefit there for us, in order to be there for someone, to care for someone because they are hurting and because they are in need.

And not only that, but Jesus is also now in Jerusalem, the place where he has been telling his disciples that he will be taken away by the officials and killed. Right here in Jerusalem where Jesus is teaching about love – about the love for God and the love for one's neighbour, about making sacrifices in order to show love, Jesus himself will crown it all with the perfect sacrifice of love. He is going to offer himself as a living sacrifice; he will offer himself as a ransom for us so that we each can receive salvation. Jesus the love incarnate not only teaches us about love, but shows us as he is betrayed, nailed to the cross, dies and is resurrected from the dead.

Jesus taught us to love our neighbours as ourselves. Love is a sacrifice, and a sacrifice is something that comes from the heart. Today is Reformation Sunday and the theme of Reformation in the Presbyterian Church in Canada is "Reformed and Reforming. Reformation is the action of improving an institution or a practice and reforming is that we keep improving and do not stop until we get the desired results. These commandments of Jesus are a call for us to be reformed and to keep reforming ourselves until we have the perfect love of Jesus. Let us check our hearts today and ask Jesus to teach us how to reform our hearts, so that we may learn to love ourselves and others. Amen.

Prayer

Enduring God, on this Reformation Sunday, we thank you today for your faithfulness to us and to the tradition that has shaped us as disciples of Jesus. Thank you for your living Word which continues to reveal him, and for the gift of your Spirit to help us interpret your wisdom in the midst of challenging times. God of guidance, speak into our lives today.

Eternal God, on this Sunday marking the faithfulness of all your saints, we give you thanks for people in our lives and across the ages who have shown us your loving kindness through their witness to Christ in so many different situations. Inspire us by their examples and show us how we, too, can live out our faith in the midst of challenging times. God of guidance, speak into our lives today.

Loving God, You keep calling us to care for those in need and show hospitality to strangers in our midst. Thank you for your persistent love which continues to comfort and challenge us all. Open our hearts and eyes so that we can see how to offer that love to others in the midst of challenging times. God of guidance, speak into our lives today.

Living God, You bring new life to the discouraged and those facing danger and death. Thank you for signs of hope which break into pressures of the pandemic and its consequences for so many, in the midst of challenging times. God of guidance,
Speak into our lives today.

Creating God, we praise you for the beauty of this world and the rhythms of nature which sustain us. Give us courage to act on behalf of your creation where it is stressed or broken and nurture our commitment to act as your stewards within creation in the midst of challenging times. God of guidance, speak into our lives today.

God of all generations, past, present, and future, we offer our gifts in gratitude for the inheritance of faithfulness we have received as followers of Jesus. Bless these gifts so that today's ministries may flourish and provide an inheritance for those who come after us, as you guide them into a future only you can see.

Now we join our voices with the followers of Jesus in every time and place in the words he taught us all:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Benediction

The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. Therefore, go out into the world and love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love others as you love yourself. And may God give you justice and freedom; may Christ Jesus set you free for love; and may the Holy Spirit go where you go and protect you on your way. Amen.