

March 22, 2020

Mark 12:28-44

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard Jesus and the religious leaders disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ 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.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³ 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." ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

³⁵ While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? ³⁶ David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared,

'The Lord said to my Lord,
"Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies
under your feet.'"

³⁷ David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?" And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

³⁸ As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Have you noticed that I tend to start my weekly sermons with a comment about seeing something I never thought I'd see or experience? It's ironic that I've started that way so often for so long, and now we are in a time we've never seen, where a day feels like a long week (at best), we're all on enforced stay-cations, and the hyper-polarization nourished by fake news, or twisted truths is now in reality a matter of life and death.

In the past week I've noticed two curious things when I've talked with people. They've either made comments along the lines of “you must be working so hard these days, there are so many people to reach out to and talk with.” Or they've made comments along the lines of “you must be enjoying your vacation now that the church is closed and people can't come.” They point to different experiences with what we call the Church. Is the Church a building, a particular physical site, or is it the group of people gathered in a shared trust around a common hope? How are we to be Church today, and in the weeks – maybe even months – to come?

We return to the gospel of Mark, with which we're wrestling from Christmas to Easter. Today we're in chapter 12. We've skipped over the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (what we call Palm Sunday) so that we can read it on the appropriate holy-day. So Jesus has come to the social, political and religious capital of the people. And once there he's been butting heads, publicly sparring with the religious leaders – all of them – about faith, community, notions of leadership and equality, and the role of institutions in the life of society and the journey of faith.

We see his final climactic encounter with another religious leader in today's reading. But here rather than a test or superfluous question, the scribe comes with what seems to be an authentic question. He's watched Jesus – his actions and heard his teachings and words. He seems to sense that there is something unique there, so he asks Jesus a question not looking to test or trap him in public and embarrass him in front of the crowds. No the scribe asks looking for enlightenment, for spiritual growth. Jesus' response is unique for he creatively combines Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18 to equate loving God with loving your neighbor and vice versa.

Mark then tells of several other subsequent encounters in which Jesus says that faith is not related to bloodlines, leadership is not patriarchal or inherited. The Messiah doesn't have to be the son of David to be the Messiah. God can do what God will do.

Jesus again criticizes the scribes, who also served as the judges and legislators in society, for abusing their positions to demand financial kick-backs for their help and personally profiting off the backs of the most vulnerable in society (the widows).

Jesus then observing the workings of the Temple Institutions remarks on the great generosity of the poor widow who gives two coins (pennies) all that she had in comparison to the large offerings of the rich. I've always heard it taught as a commendation of the faithful generosity of the women who gives all she has. But the text seems to present the story more as a condemnation of the Temple, a religious institution that would force the poorest of society, those on the margins to give the little that they have to live with.

It's not surprising that the religious leaders are embarrassed at the delight of the listening crowd, and scheme to take out Jesus, to make Israel great again.

Jesus affirms repeatedly in today's passage (and the whole gospel) that what we do matters, that our personal actions towards others and ourselves are related to how we relate to God. We're not important because of our bloodlines, our gender, our place in society, what we own or can give....we are valuable to God because *we are*.

To describe a great moment, or meal we use the cliché "oh it's heaven on earth." But Jesus is saying to us that we are called to be part of God's bringing heaven to earth – in how we live, how we act, how we speak and how we treat ourselves.

So, does the Church need to be a building or institution? No. Now it does help to have a group around which we rally and gather, that can provide consistent leadership when we all have our own work loads, concerns and requirements. But the Church is not the building. It's the people.

How are we to be Church in this season of COVID-19? How do we live out our faith and values when we must stay at home?

I've been struck by different glimpses of how we do that this week....seeing Anne-Marie a week ago Saturday at Trader Joes in a parallel check-out line. I heard her speaking kindly, graciously, listening reassuringly to the woman next to her in line (at a healthy distance of course).

I saw it Friday as we served dinner to those who are hungry – the widows of our society – on the sidewalk in front of our building. Many of you came to serve even at risk to yourselves. Of course, we're being careful and wise.

I see it in our daily Zoom calls where we check-in with each other, listening to testimonies of the hope we see, sharing our concerns, praying together.

How about you? Where have you been seeing the love of God, the living-out-of the teachings of Jesus in your life? Where are you being called to "be Church" beyond and outside the walls at 5951 College Avenue?

How will we be Church – follow Jesus – in the days to come when the contagion of COVID-19 just might expand exponentially around us? when it might impact us personally?

I don't know what will happen. We do know that the spread of the virus will eventually stop. Stay-at-home will end. We will be back at Church – in the building – together. But between now and then, it's uncertain. What I do know is certain is that Jesus promises to love and walk with us....he responds to our questions like he does to the inquisitive scribe. Jesus stands up for us and cheers us on as he does for the widows in the text. God in Jesus tells us over and over – in words, in action and in the way God gives his life to us:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." – John 14:27.

Amen.