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November 4, 2018

“The Great Commandment”

Ruth 1:1-18 Mark 12:28-34 Hebrews 9:11-14

INTRODUCTION TO RUTH 1:1-18

We’ve been reading from the life of Job and how he lost his children and flocks and yet would not curse God. This morning we begin looking at the story of a woman who has lost a husband and sons. The opening verses of the book of Ruth tell the story of a little widow of Bethlehem. Naomi feels that the Lord has turned against her. She left her home because of a drought. In a land of Gentiles her husband and sons die and she is forced to return home, but she will not do soalone.

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INTRODUCTION TO MARK 12:28-34

What is the Greatest commandment? Moses started with 10, but by the time Jesus came, the list had grown to 613...and whole books of commentary on those 613 laws had been written that had people even more confused. So we can find it understandable when a scribe, one who had many times over copied those laws came up to Jesus to ask him which of all the commandments was the most important. He wasn't trying to trap Jesus. He was a seeking to know which one of the commandments would get him closest to God. Hear the word of God from Mark 12:28-34

Let's pray. Dear Lord, Thank you for this, your word. Open our eyes to see, our minds to understand, our hearts to receive your word. Open my lips to share what you have given to me and prepare us all to be changed so that we may respond to your word through the power of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

At one point I complained to editor of the Baytown Sun, David Bloom that the Baytown Sun didn't have enough cartoons. I knew there had to be more to comics than Alley Oop. I enjoy Frank and Ernest. I saw one where Frank and Ernest are standing in front of row after row of shelves of books. On top of one of the shelves is a sign, which reads, "Law Library." Franks turns to Ernest and says, "It's frightening when you think that we started out with just Ten Commandments."

It is sort of frightening isn't it? We started out with 10 and now we have an estimated 35 million laws on the books in the United States alone. Some of them are very good and deeply needed. But there are some that probably need to be repealed.

For example: There is a law in Florida that makes it illegal for a woman who's single, divorced or widowed to parachute out of a plane on Sunday afternoon.

In Portland, Oregon, it is illegal to wear roller skates in public restrooms.

In Halethorpe, Maryland, a kiss lasting more than a second is an illegal act.

In Amarillo, Texas, it is against the law to take a bath on the main street during banking hours.

In St. Louis, there used to be a law that if your automobile spooked a horse, you had to hide the car. And if hiding didn't work, you had to start dismantling it until the horse calmed down. I said "used to be" because that one got repealed. Finally!

In the Presbyterian Church, we have a collection of laws called The Book of Order. It contains 3 sections, the Form of Government (FOG), the Directory For Worship (DFW) and the Rules of Discipline (ROD). These three sections outline how we are to deal with each other in the church, how we are to make decisions, how we relate to one another, how we order our worship, how we discipline those within our church who act in unloving ways or take actions that disturb the peace purity and unity of the church. This is what it used to look like (hold up old Book of Order. This is what it looks like now. (Hold up BOO 2019) Although in 2013 it did look like this (Hold up a 2013 version.) I think we're headed in the right direction.

What is the most important commandment? Jesus says it all starts with loving God. It all starts with loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Some have accused Presbyterians with loving God with all our mind, mind, mind and mind. I've had fun with John Calvin whose crest includes a flaming heart in a hand lifted to God, suggesting that instead it should be a flaming left brain. After all, what to you get when you have a faith founded by a lawyer? I saw a quote from Stephen Wright that said, "99% of lawyers give the rest a bad name."

We are to love the Lord with all of our heart-our emotions, crying and laughing, sighing and chuckling. We are to love the Lord with all our soul-our courage and trembling, our vitality and our vulnerability. We are to love the Lord with all our mind-our left AND our right brain. We are to love the Lord with all our strength—our physical and our spiritual muscles.

Some folks say that we need to love ourselves first before we can love others and love God. The problem with that is if we start with loving ourselves it's hard to move on! In this country we have got the love of self down pat! That's the great American pastime, loving ourselves.

When the scribe asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment Jesus put it in the right sequence. First we are to love God, then because we love God and experience God's love, then we are able to love our neighbor and because we

love our neighbor, then we can love ourselves. Then we too will be not far from the kingdom of God.

A group of professional people posed this question to a group of 4 to 8 year-olds, "What does love mean?" The answers they got were broader and deeper than anyone could have imagined. I had 20 but these are my top 10

1. Rebecca- age 8 "When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love."
2. Billy - age 4 "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth."
3. Karl - age 5 "Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other."
4. Terri - age 4 "Love is what makes you smile when you're tired."
5. Bobby - age 7 "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen."
6. Noelle - age 7 "Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, and then he wears it every day."
7. Mary Ann - age 4 "Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day."
8. Lauren - age 4 "I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes and has to go out and buy new ones."
9. Jessica - age 8 "You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget."
10. Nikka - age 6 "If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend who you hate."

Last Saturday hate came calling at the Tree of Life Synagogue ... in Mister Roger's Neighborhood. The Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh where 11 worshippers were killed last week is six blocks from the house where Mr. Rogers lived. Last night at the concert at Town Square I announced that on Sunday November 18th at 4:00 p.m. we will host K'nesseth Israel so that they can hold a service of mourning for those lives that were taken. They are still not able to worship in their own sanctuary here in Baytown because of flooding from Hurricane Harvey.

Jesus taught us that our neighbor is anyone with whom we have contact. It makes no difference whether our neighbor lives next door or across town or across the world. If our life somehow impinges on someone else's life, that person is our neighbor. God's world is a giant neighborhood. I don't want to sound too much like Mr. Rogers, but, if we take the teachings of Jesus literally, we ARE residents of a giant neighborhood and everyone on earth is our neighbor.

We just finished celebrating Halloween when scary costumes and movies were the order of the day. Did you know that George Romero, the man who wrote and

directed "Night of the Living Dead" and practically invented Zombie movies got his start on....Mr. Roger's Neighborhood?

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Who is my neighbor? When Jesus talked about loving our neighbor, he wasn't just talking about the people next door. He was talking about the subdivisions next door and the states next door and the nations next door.

Frederick Buechner, in his book The Magnificent Defeat, describes 4 different kinds of love for others.

The love for equals is a human thing--of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing--the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing--to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich. The world is always bewildered by these saints.

And then there is the love for the enemy--love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured one's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world.

Jesus asked his father to forgive the very men that inflicted pain upon him even to the point of death! Jesus' dream was that people should care about other people. Like the children's song says, "red, brown and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world."

Judy Gunn added a verse that says, "young and old big and small Jesus loves us one and all." In keeping with the color theme I'd like to add a verse that goes, "He loves me and you whether you vote red or blue. Jesus needs some more purple in the world."

Jesus wants us to love people of every race, people of every nation, people of every political persuasion.

If we are to love even our enemies, who does that leave us to be excused from loving? No one. The best way to get rid of our enemies is to make them our friends.

Here, in our own nation, we are a nation divided. We are divided by race, by religion, by economic position. The most segregated hour in the week is on Sunday mornings.

It is easy to give in to our baser emotions; to hate; to seek revenge when someone has wronged us; to defend ourselves and strike back when we've been falsely accused, to ignore the plight of the poor; to wrap ourselves in smug self satisfaction with the attitude that we have worked for what we have, let others do the same. But there is a man hanging on the cross who says to us, "I have loved you with a love that can only be repaid one way, "Love God with all you are and love your neighbor as you love yourself."

A man was behind another car at a traffic light. The light turned green and the first car just sat there. The person was looking down, and the man assumed that she was looking at her phone. He honked and she didn't move. The man got more agitated and started screaming and rolled down his window and started making gestures. Then the lights came on the roof of the car behind him. The officer came to the window and asked for license and registration. The man was still hot and he said, "You can't give me a ticket for sitting still in my car." The officer said, "I know, but I saw the "Honk if you love Jesus" bumper sticker and the Christian fish on your car and was wondering if this was a stolen car" (He was honking, but it was not because he loved Jesus.)

"And they'll know we are Christians by the fish on our cars, yes they'll know we are Christians by our cars."

Why should I love my neighbor? Because I love God, and God has commanded me to love my neighbor. John's epistle says that "No one can truly love God who does not love his or her neighbor." If we can truly love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength AND our neighbor as ourselves, then, like the scribe who came to Jesus so long ago, we too from the kingdom will be not far

Jesus said, "A new commandment I give unto you that you love one another as I have loved you. By this shall everyone know that you are my followers if you have love for one another."

Jesus is the one who said, "Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends."

He is the one who said, "This is my commandment that you love one another that your joy may be full."

He is the one who said, "This is my body broken for you, this is my blood shed for you. This do in remembrance of me.

That was his last commandment, fully in keeping with his Great Commission and ... his Great Commandment.

Let's pray. Merciful God, hear our prayer, as we give you the honor and praise due your glorious name. We thank you for Jesus who offers up prayers and supplications to You. Through his new commandment we hear how to stir up one another to love and good works. By his example we gather as his disciples to sing your psalms of adoration and feast on the sacrament he ordained. The bread of the covenant will sustain us and nourish us through the trials that wait us. The cup of new life assures us that you will never forsake us,

Hear our prayers

1 Richard Fairchild, "Not Far From The Kingdom of God".