

First Presbyterian Church

Charlotte, North Carolina

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“Not Far From the Kingdom”

Today we kick off our summer sermon series on the Ten Commandments. For the next twelve weeks, as we worship together as one community at 11:00, we will examine this foundational part of our faith, taking the time each week to consider one commandment at a time, reflecting upon its meaning and call upon our lives.

Today we step into this study not by reading from Exodus or Deuteronomy, but rather by considering a story from Mark’s Gospel. These are familiar words to many, considered to be Jesus’ summation of the law, often referred to as the Great Commandment, or the Rule of Love, and they help us to contextualize and begin thinking about the place of the Ten Commandments in our lives.

I’ll be reading from Mark 12: 28-34. Hear now the Word of God.

An abiding memory I have from the church I served before coming here comes from an experience at Vacation Bible School. As we are gearing up for our own VBS in just a week or so, it seems apt to me today. The first summer I was at First Presbyterian Church in Oxford, Mississippi, the theme for VBS was “Jerusalem Marketplace.” As the name suggests, the week was focused on life in Jerusalem- the children were divided into 12 groups representing the 12 tribes of Israel.

Children and adults alike dressed in costume and experienced activities that recreated a piece of what life might have been like for people around the time of Jesus’ life. It was a unique week, and the children responded very well.

It was also Vacation Bible School, with dozens of elementary aged children in the summer, so it was wild. I loved watching the energy with which they took on the activities, and hearing their voices fill the church courtyard. But my favorite memory of that week is the memory of the final song they sang together every day. After a morning full of laughter and jumping and busyness, as the group gathered for a final assembly, they would sing several songs, always ending with one called “Love the Lord.”

Its words were taken directly from the *shema*- a passage of scripture that takes its name from the first Hebrew word *shema*, meaning *hear*.

It never ceased to amaze me as I stood in the fellowship hall, surrounded by young children who, to that point had been squirming and chatting, to hear them join their voices and solemnly sing the words, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is one."

I am not a particularly musical person, but I have a great appreciation for the role of music in our worship and faith. Music is a key part of Christian formation, as through song we learn a lot about who God is and who we are. It wasn't until my first semester of theology in seminary that I really began to appreciate this, as we studied complex theological concepts such as God's sovereignty and the Trinity and I realized that much of what I knew about them came from hymns I'd been singing my whole life.

So listening to these children singing these particular words that summer made me smile.

The words are beautiful in and of themselves, but knowing something about the *shema* makes them even more profound. While Christians may recognize the words, they don't hold as significant a place for us as they do for our Jewish brothers and sisters. The *shema* is a central element of the Jewish faith- in its entirety, the passage reads:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9).

Throughout the ages, the Jews have followed these words, reciting them twice daily, teaching them to their children, and speaking them as their last words. They are a cornerstone of faith and of life.

And so when Jesus was asked by the scribe in this morning's passage from Mark to quantify all of the commandments and name the most important, it shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone when the first words out of his mouth were the *shema*.

But to these familiar words he appended another piece of the law, this found in Leviticus: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." While Jesus was not the first to link these two

commandments, his doing so, as articulated in all three synoptic gospels, established the Rule of Love as the essence of Christian faith and life.¹

And so it makes sense that these are the words we consider at the outset of our communal study of the Ten Commandments this summer. Just as the words delivered to Moses on Mt. Sinai are foundational for Jews and Christians alike, these words of Jesus to the gathered crowd are at the core of what it means to be Christian.

While we are used to thinking about commandments as rules and regulations, lumping them with signs placed in classrooms prohibiting chewing gum and running, or the laws that govern our civil society, the truth is that they are more about relationship and community than they are about corralling and curtailing rambunctious behavior.

When considering the place of the commandments in our lives, it's helpful to ask ourselves whether the Bible is a list of rules, or a shaper of character. That's a big distinction.

If it is just a compilation of rules, then our relationship with it can be fairly simple: do this and you're fine, do that and it's trouble.

But in his response to the scribe, Jesus made it very clear that this approach is inadequate. If he had come simply to be the enforcer of a set of regulations, then no doubt his answer would have been quite different.

But Jesus came to offer a new life- not one free of rules, but one in which we are set free for joyful obedience because of who God is, and who he calls us to be. And that is a life in which we live not according to a prescribed set of rules, but rather in grateful response to the loving initiative of God in our lives.

Looking at it that way changes how we understand the rules, regulations, and commandments we read in the Bible.

Jesus' response to the scribe, his linking of the command to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves, is not a negation of the commandments as delivered to Moses, or to the 600 some-odd laws in the Hebrew bible. It is, rather, an enrichment of them, a call to embrace them not simply as some checklist of right behavior, but rather as a guiding and shaping force of a life that is about more than simply what we as individuals do and don't do.

As we will discover in the coming weeks as we delve into the Ten Commandments, these so-called regulations are so much more than mere rules. They are the foundation of a communal

¹ Lamar Williamson, Jr. Mark, *Interpretation Bible Commentary*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983).

life under a God who cares not simply about what we do, but about how and why we do it as well.

Jewish tradition teaches that the first five commandments concern humans' relationship to God, while the second five concern our relationships with one another. And it goes on to stress that each half is integral to the whole. For Jews and Christians alike, the Ten Commandments show us that how we act towards and about God cannot be separated from how we act towards and about other people.

Jesus' summation of the law in his response to the scribe further elucidates this point. The Ten Commandments- all of God's law- have more to do with who we are than with what we do. We are the people of a loving God who calls us to live together in community under his gracious reign- loving God and loving one another- not one or the other, but both.

This past Tuesday night, I gathered with our Stephen Ministers for their bimonthly meeting. Instead of meeting here at the church, we took a field trip. We met at Avondale Presbyterian Church on Park Road. The reason we were there was to experience the labyrinth that they have on their campus. Labyrinths, based upon ancient design, are paths that begin at an outside point and lead to a central spot. Different from a maze, a labyrinth has one way in and one way out, and you cannot get lost in one.

They have long been used for spiritual practice in a number of faith traditions, and several churches, including Avondale, have labyrinths on their campuses.

After a quick historical and practical overview led by Dennard Teague, our group went outside to experience the labyrinth firsthand. Of the twenty or so people there, only about four had ever walked a labyrinth before.

When I had done it in the past, it had always been alone, which is the way labyrinths are usually experienced. I was curious as to how it would work as a group effort.

What happened was profound.

We gathered at the entrance to the labyrinth and, one by one, entered and began to follow the circuitous path. Everyone spaced themselves about 10 or so paces apart and walked at their own pace. Eventually we were all in the labyrinth, walking sometimes as close as shoulder to shoulder, but in complete silence. Some people walked with their heads down, watching their footfall on the brick path. Others looked up and around at the peaceful scenery, taking in the beautiful spring evening light.

I don't know what was happening in the thoughts of those around me, but I can guess that some were praying and some were contemplating, no doubt at least one was compiling a

grocery list, and some may have been blissfully free of thought. As I looked around, I realized that I was standing (or walking) in a perfect metaphor for today's message.

For about 20 minutes in that labyrinth, I witnessed a living example of the beautiful interplay between love of God and love of neighbor. Each person was having their own personal experience- in prayer or meditation or silence- but we were not alone. We were loving God and loving one another- being in relationship with our creator while also being in relationship with one another. And I realized then that so much of what our life of faith is about looks something like this.

It happens here in worship, and in circles and bible studies. It happens in Sunday school classes and youth group, on mission trips and retreats, at hospital bedsides and gravesides. Wherever we are practicing our faith, we are living out the truth that the love of God and the love of neighbor are inextricably intertwined.

The solitary practice of faith- my focus on my relationship with God- is important, but it is incomplete. And the community practice of faith- my focus on how I treat my neighbor- is important, but it is incomplete.

It is only through loving God that I can truly love my neighbor. And only in loving my neighbor can I begin more fully to love God.

One without the other doesn't work. This is the message of the Ten Commandments, and the message of Jesus in the Greatest Commandment.

The love of God and the love of neighbor belong together - they form the foundation for the life of faith, a life lived toward the kingdom of God, that place that is both here and not here, now and not yet, when the fullness and richness of God's intention for creation will be realized and we will live in perfect harmony with our creator and our brothers and sisters.

It's not far away.

Thanks be to God. Amen.