

MAKING IT LAST

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Text: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Mark 12:28-34

SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

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 at home and 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.

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." 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'; 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." 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.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

There is a liquid substance, many of us deal with on a regular basis, and it costs approximately \$10,000 a gallon. Yes, you could buy around 4,000 gallons of gasoline with what you would have to pay for one gallon of this stuff, yet it is found in many of our homes and offices. Does anyone have any idea as to what I am referring to? This high priced liquid is the ink for ink-jet printers. Many of you know what I am talking about. These cartridges for ink-jet printers sometimes cost as much as the printer itself. According to *Consumer Reports* magazine, this ink sells for anywhere from \$13 up to \$75 an ounce. To give you a little more perspective, when I checked the market on Friday sterling silver was selling at \$15.60 an ounce.

With these kinds of costs, there are chemists and engineers working at coming up with a more economical way to put ink on paper. A little more than a year ago a team in China came up with a possible solution. They developed a water-jet printer. The liquid you put in the printer is water, not ink. The way it works is that you use a special kind of paper that is treated with water responsive dyes. So when the water touches the paper it unlocks these dyes and you have print. There is just one little catch. The print disappears when the water dries.

Now, before you dismiss that idea as totally useless, it usually takes around 24 hours for the moisture to dry completely and the image to fade. Furthermore, this paper can be used again and again. So, for example, we could print up our church bulletins, use them on Sunday morning, gather them all up after the service, let the paper dry out and fade and reuse the paper again for next Sunday's bulletin. Or take last Tuesday's session meeting; we had around 12 people at that meeting and each was given maybe 5 printed sheets of paper. That is 60 pieces of paper used for an hour meeting. What if we could just let them fade and reuse them at another time? On a larger scale, what about newspapers that are read on one day and then discarded? What if the paper could be collected and used again and again? Once you start thinking about this concept, it is not hard to imagine a variety of uses.

While this technology exists, as far as I know there has been no commercial development and marketing. You cannot go into Best Buy and find a water-jet printer for sale. But this idea of printing fading away got me thinking. In Ecclesiastes it says that there is no end to the writing of books. That was true thousands of years ago and it is true today. How much of what has been printed really needs to be preserved? Even if it does need to be preserved for more than 24 hours, how much of it needs to exist after a year, or a decade, or a century? On the shelves in my office, I have probably 500 books, maybe more. Yet, because of the internet and other electronic resources, I only glance at them occasionally. There are hundreds of my books that I haven't touched in years. In some ways, haven't those books already faded away? If a book is never read, and its contents are forgotten, the pages may be lying around somewhere, but for all practical purposes hasn't this book disappeared?

The only record we have of Jesus writing anything was with his finger in the dirt. As far as we know he never put pen and ink to paper. We also do not know if he ever owned a book or a scroll, or kept any kind of written material. But there is no doubt that he was immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures. And the way he spoke about what God was trying to say was so important that down through the ages tons of paper and gallons of ink have been used to preserve his words. Those are printed pages that we do not want to fade away.

Part of our scripture lesson for this morning is about a conversation between Jesus and a scribe, one who was devoted to preserving the scriptures. It is an interesting passage because Jesus and the scribe end up in agreement. We might even say they are on the same page. This is the only place in Mark's Gospel where a scribe is seen in a positive light. Everywhere else scribes are angry and arguing with Jesus.

Before we get into this conversation, a little background might be helpful. Around 600 years before Jesus was born, the Babylonians conquered the land of Judah and leveled the city of Jerusalem, destroying the temple. Now, in most countries when the Babylonians destroyed their temples, they essentially destroyed their religion, because the common belief was that the deity either lived in the temple, or the temple was the only means for the deity to connect with the worshipers. Destroy the temple, and that particular god faded away. The Jews had a different idea. Their belief in God was not tied to a place, not to the temple itself, but rather to what God had said to them. So as long as they could remember what God had said, they were connected to God.

However, they wanted to do more than rely on human memory. So their scholars and scribes began collecting and writing down all that they believed God had said to them. There were lots of stories and songs and prayers, but there were also a lot of instructions of how God's people were supposed to live. We call them commandments and usually when we hear that term we think of the Big Ten, the Ten Commandments, but actually the scribes had calculated that if you go through the Torah, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, there were 613 different commandments; 248 of them were positive "Thou shalt do this..." and 365 of them were negative, "Thou shalt not do that..." Now that is a lot of instructions, so they were looking for ways to get a handle on it all. Many argued just memorize it all; learn all 613 commandments, obey them and you are good. Well, that was not the easiest thing to do, plus some of those commandments seemed more critical than others. I mean, don't murder anyone has more far reaching consequences than don't eat bacon because it is not kosher. So there were scholars who were trying to come up with a system for preserving these things God had said in a helpful and practical way.

That is the general background to our gospel text this morning. In the verses prior to this conversation various religious leaders try to trick Jesus into saying something they could use against him. They ask him about paying taxes and about life after death, and Jesus avoided their traps without any difficulty. This scribe has been listening to this verbal sparring match and evidently he was impressed. So he asks Jesus a question, "Which commandment is first of all?"

What he was really asking was this: Of all the things God has said to us, what should be preserved above all else? What must never be forgotten, never fade from memory? What must be held on at all cost if we are to remain God's people? It is a very good question. Today we are still asking that question. What is at the core of our faith? What is essential and what is superficial? What must we make sure will last and what can be allowed to fade away?

Jesus does not hesitate but answers by quoting verbatim those verses we read from Deuteronomy. They are words that every Jew knows, even today, because they are recited every morning and every evening as a prayer. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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." Now, when you stop and really think about this, it sounds rather weird. This is the first and most important commandment, the top of those 613 instructions, but how does this work? How can you command someone to love? I mean, imagine a marine drill sergeant with a bunch of raw recruits, and he hollers at the top of his lungs, "All right, people! When I give the command you will love your country! Ready begin!" It just doesn't work that way, does it?

But think of it this way: suppose when my granddaughters were born, someone had said, "You have to love them. It is part of the job of being a grandfather." So I said to their parents, "Okay, I am glad they are healthy and all. Let me know when they graduate from high school, and if I am still around when and if they decide to get married, I guess I would like to be invited to the wedding. Will that cover it?"

That would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? That is not the way it works. I want to know everything about them, I mean everything. I am interested in potty training and when they are sick, and what they like to watch on TV. I want to know when they lose a tooth, what their Halloween costumes were, what they want for Christmas and who their best friend is. And I will gladly talk about them. You want to know anything about them? You don't even have to ask. I will tell you about them any chance I get, even when I am up here preaching a sermon. Two of them live 500 miles away in Cincinnati, but they have not faded away from my thoughts or my life. I don't see them as often as I would like, but I am still "Granddad" and they are the most wonderful, the most fantastic, and the most amazing granddaughters in the whole world.

How do we obey the commandment to love God? The same way you love anyone else. Those verses that follow in Deuteronomy tell us exactly how. "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise." I will gladly talk to you about my granddaughters when I am at home and when I am away, when I lie down and when I rise. That is no problem. That is just what you do when you are a grandparent. If we want love God, if we want to preserve what needs to be preserved, if we want to hold on to what is essential, then it needs to permeate our lives. It is not just something that happens in some holy place on special occasions, like going to church just on Christmas and Easter. No, this is something that is part of everyday life, in our homes, when we lie down at night, when we get up in the morning. It is something we need to teach our children, something that is a habit, something routine, normal, and just what we do.

Out of this habit comes another one. Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love God, but there is second one linked to the first. It is found in Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love of God cannot be separated from love of those around us. When we truly love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, we cannot help but love God's children as well. This is what needs to be remembered. This is what we cannot allow to fade away. The scribe agreed completely. He said loving God and others was more important than offerings and sacrifices, more important than rituals and traditions, more important than the temple system. Those things might fade away, but love is eternal. This is what we must make sure will last.

Some of this is what Barb Mineart was talking about in our "Imagine!" video we watched at the beginning of the service. When Barb imagined what our church might be like in the future, she said it would always be there, a constant presence in the lives of the members. The church would be there in times of joy and celebration as well as in times of struggle and sorrow. She also said that FPC would be a constant presence in our community, referring to our mission statement of externally serving. Essentially Barb was saying that it is through the church that she is better able to obey these two great commandments that Jesus refers to in our lesson. Through her involvement in the day to day life of our congregation she is better able to love God. She is also better able to love her neighbors, as we serve those around us. I especially liked the way she ended her thoughts. She said, "Yes, it is worth it to give to the church, because it is always there for me." I hope you will keep her words in mind as you think about your financial commitment for next year.

Down through the ages, there are some things that will inevitably change, not just in our church, but every church. What was so important 100 years ago, or even 10 years ago, is not so critical now. Music, rituals, traditions, rules and regulations often fade away over time. But the core of who we are, what we do and why we do it, those things we can make last. If we continue to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength; if we continue to love one another, and those around us, then the church will always be here. You might even say that these two great commandments are water-jet printed on our hearts. We say we are marked by the waters of baptism, meaning that the Word of God has left his impression on us. However this mark will never fade as long as it becomes a part of our lives, in our homes, on the way, in our lying down and our rising up.

One way we renew this impression is by coming to the table. When we break the bread and share the cup we remember how much God loved us by sending his Son into this world to live among us and to die for us. The memory of this love kindles our love for God and for one another. Much has changed over the centuries. The way we worship in our church is often very different from other churches in our community and around the world. But we all pause every now and then, we hold up a loaf and say, "The body of Christ, broken for you." We hold up a cup and say, "The blood of Christ, shed for you." We love. We love God. We love one another. We give thanks, and we make it last. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.