TPC’s Values: Inclusivity (Part 1)

OT 26B-21

Mark 12: 28-34

1 John: 7-16

10/10/21

Prayer for Illumination

**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.

**1 John 4: 7-16**

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;

everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God,

for God is love.

God’s love was revealed among us in this way:

God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

In this is love,

not that we loved God but that he loved us

and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Beloved, since God loved us so much,

we also ought to love one another.

No one has ever seen God;

if we love one another, God lives in us,

and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us,

because he has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.

God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God,

and they abide in God.

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love,

and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

TPC’s Values: Inclusivity (Part 1)

For the past four weeks, we explored what we hope you agree are some exciting new endeavors here at Towson Presbyterian Church. Most notably, we’ve launched a brand-new, virtual campus of TPC that is available for one and all. In doing so, we’ve restructured staff roles to not only tend to this new campus, but also increase our children, youth, and family ministries. And we’ve updated our church structure to make mission work more accessible amid new hunger and peacemaking action teams. I don’t want to spend a lot of time this morning rehashing it… but sufficed to say, we sense the Spirit in the midst of this, and are excited to see what’s in store. To learn more, please go to towsonpres.org and explore.

This Sunday… we change course a bit. Instead of focusing on all the new things going on in the life of our church, we’re going to spend the next six weeks exploring what isn’t changing at all. Namely, our values. Those four words we connect to our community of faith as often as we can. Inclusive – Curious – Compassionate – Courageous.

And we begin… this morning… with that first value. Inclusivity. This week—we explore why we value it. Next week, how our changes, we believe, we’ll enable us to better achieve it.

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 Inclusivity—A value that is built on the understanding, as 1 John declares, God is love. Three little words that make an incredibly profound statement. In fact, they’re three little words that, all by themselves, make for a rather profound sermon.

Profound… but not radical. Hardly new information, right? I think most of us have heard that phrase before. And I hope… I deeply hope that you’ve experienced it to be true amid your own relationship with God.

God is love!

Same thing goes for our Gospel Lesson, by the way. The Great Commandment. Perhaps the most recognizable aspect of the Judea-Christian tradition. But most have heard it too many times for it to seem anything close to radical. We already know it… so how could it possibly be life-changing for us… they way it was for the scribe.

You see, as Mark tells it, this scribe overheard Jesus debating with other religious leaders of the day—Pharisees and Sadducees. But he had a question he wanted to pose to Jesus. So the scribe went right up and asked this supposedly great rabbi out of Nazareth a question intended to cut through all the minutia and get to the real heart of the matter. “Tell me, Jesus, what is the very first, the most important commandment that goes before all others?”

Jesus’ answer was remarkably direct. He took the Hebrew laws of Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 and combined them into what we call the Great Commandment, saying, “Love the Lord your God with all that you are and all that you have… AND… love your neighbor as yourself.”

It was beautiful. It was profound. And while it may not seem so to you and me today… it was as radical as anything that scribe had ever heard!

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We have to understand… a scribe’s whole life was lived in and around the Torah… the Hebrew law. Scribes were brought up studying the ancient texts of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and the laws they contained. In fact, scribes didn’t just read them—they transcribed them. They memorized them. They taught them. For the job of a scribe, above everything else, was “preserving and interpreting the Law in order to maintain its centrality in Judaism.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

So it was the scribe’s job to make sure others understood what the law actually said. What it meant. How it applied to daily, Hebrew life. It’s why scribes worked so closely with other religious leaders—like the Pharisees and chief priests… to make sure they were doing their part in keeping Hebrew law central to Hebrew life. So it’s putting it mildly to say that scribes cared deeply about Hebrew law… and its role in Hebrew society.

And… it’s what made the scribes one of the most hostile groups towards Jesus. Like the Pharisees, in particular, the Gospels all make clear that Hebrew scribes—as a general whole—wanted Jesus out of the picture. Because Jesus was so readily breaking with so much of their understanding of Hebrew law. You know?

I mean, picture this scribe’s whole life, which had been built on learning and interpreting Hebrew law… and then, here comes this newfangled rabbi from Nazareth who interpreted the law differently—sometimes very differently—than everyone else. Just where did this rabbi get off changing the way they’d been interpreting something for centuries?!

It’s why scribes viewed Jesus as dangerous. He was teaching a different version of what they new the law to be.

So we have to understand… this was not some spontaneous question the scribe just suddenly posed to Jesus. No… this question was, in many ways… *the* question of all questions that the religious leaders could ever put before him.

“Which commandment is first of all?”

“Which of the 613 religious laws found in the Torah is most important?”

“Which is the law upon which all the other laws are founded? Which is the law that helps us understand the intent and purpose behind the other laws?”

Granted, the nameless scribe didn’t put his question exactly that way, but that’s what he’s asking.

So Jesus’ response—that it all boils down to love—really was *radical*.

Saying that the 613 Hebrew commandments found in the Torah are all designed to guide our love of God and our love of others… was a *radical* reframing of everything the scribe had been taught to that point.

But even more than that, it was also an absurd simplification of the law. A seemingly absurd simplification of not just communal laws… but family laws… and food laws… and purity codes… and trade and commerce laws… and rules outlining liturgical rituals…

You see… the God-given Hebrew law was both so vast and so specific, religious leaders had always assumed the law was an end in and of itself. That each law was a command of God meant to be rigidly followed simply because that was what God desired.

So it made sense to them… if you follow the Hebrew law to a “T,” then you were “good.” If you did all that the law said you should do… and avoided all the things that the law said you shouldn’t do… well… then you were “faithful.” You were considered “clean” and “pure” and “pleasing to God.”

But if you didn’t follow the religious law to a “T”… if you happened to do something the law said you shouldn’t… well, then, you were considered “bad,” “unfaithful,” “unclean,” “impure,” “displeasing to God.” And if you were counted among this group—unfaithful, unclean, impure—then you weren’t fit for society until you could be ritually cleansed.

But in some cases… there were people who had done something so bad… or had developed a condition that was seemingly so impure—like lepers, or the blind, or the possessed, or the divorced, and more—they couldn’t not easily… or ever, really… be “cleansed.”

These were the people most often pushed to the margins. Denied their dignity… Denied their place in community because they couldn’t live up to the religious leaders’ interpretation of various codes and commands.

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And it broke Jesus heart—the way religious leaders kept using the law to divide, rather than unite. It broke his heart. The way religious leaders turned something God intended to bring people together into a weapon used to create insiders… and outsiders. It’s why Jesus spent so, so much of his time with those in the margins—with those society excluded. He yearned to demonstrate that the kingdom of God excludes no one—no one. Least of all those pushed away.

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But… we’re still known for this, aren’t we? The Church in general… and religious leaders, in particular. The greater Church still has a reputation for taking something like religious rules and laws and employing them to create division. Using what are most often very poor interpretations of Scripture to create categories of good and bad. Categories of those who should have authority and dignity… and those who certainly shouldn’t.

Examples are still too easy to see. In many Christian traditions today, women still can’t preach or hold office in the Church, and LGBTQ+ are denied both their dignity and their rights as beautiful, precious children of God.

But it’s also much subtler than that. Like the struggle of churches that claim God loves the poor… but then do little to nothing to actually serve the poor of their community. Or churches that say God is on the side of the oppressed or the excluded, but do little to nothing to speak up for those who’ve been silenced by systems the church community is a part of.

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This is one of the reasons why—for the first few years of my career—I was uncomfortable telling strangers what I did for a living. You know the drill… You meet someone new and one of the first things you’re asked is what you do for a living? And there I was, fresh out of seminary, and actually a bit embarrassed to say that I was a pastor. A Christian religious leader. To be clear, I wasn’t embarrassed by my faith. I didn’t want to the other to assume I was one who judged those who were different from me. I didn’t want people assuming I used Scripture as a means of condemning or separating rather than uniting or loving.

But over time, I began to realize… instead of being shy to admit I was a pastor… shouldn’t I be bold to share a different understanding of the Christian faith… and the inclusive love Christ calls us to share? Instead of just hoping people I meet wouldn’t assume I’m judgmental or condemnatory, shouldn’t I be among the first, the loudest to proclaim that God loves all. Yes, all. Literally… ALL. No exceptions!?

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It’s one of the reasons I was first drawn to Towson Presbyterian almost five years ago. For two decades now, TPC has made clear this is a community that values inclusion. So much so that today… amid the four key values we want everyone to know we hold dear… inclusivity intentionally stands first.

Because we believe we can’t say God is love… and then act as if everyone isn’t loved by God.

We can’t hear Jesus tell us that the very first and primary commandment is to love God and love neighbors as ourselves… and then pretend God doesn’t call us to love some people because we don’t like them… or because we disagree with them… or because they make us uncomfortable… or because we just plain ol’ don’t understand them and find it easier to judge and exclude them rather than get to know and embrace them.

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But, of course, just because something is made simpler, doesn’t mean it’s made easier.

Just because Jesus prioritized 613 religious laws under the primary command to love God and love neighbors… doesn’t mean it’s easy for us to follow this command.

It’s not. And it is, frankly, one of the primary challenges of valuing *inclusion* the way we do.

For if we’re truly striving to be inclusive, friends… if we truly believe and strive to live out God’s inclusive love for all, then that includes the person we like the least. It includes the one we disagree with the most.

It means we believe the left must love the right and vice versa. It means both poor and wealthy are called to embrace. It means national citizenship has no bearing here because we’re all children of God.

Do you see what I mean? If we love God with all that we are, and love our neighbor as ourself… all the other lines of differentiation dissipate… as we begin to uncover the life that Jesus spent his entire life trying to reveal.

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Impressively, you’d think the scribe would’ve hated the answer Jesus gave him. You’d assume that, a scribe of all people, would reject Jesus’ reframing of the entire purpose behind the law. But he didn’t. In fact, Mark says the scribe agreed with every word. Perhaps stunned by both the profundity and beauty in what he’d just heard, the scribe stepped back and said, “You’re right. I never saw it before, but you’re right.”

And then… then the scribe took it once step further, saying. “Loving God and loving neighbor… they’re more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices we could ever bring.”

“Loving God and loving neighbor are more important than anything else we can possibly do.”

Which made the scribe the first person to articulate what Jesus had been trying so hard to show the religious leaders since the day he stepped foot in Jerusalem. Love… love is what matters to God!

Love… love is the way God has ordained us to live.

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Amazing… and yet the lesson wasn’t quite done. When Jesus heard just how well the scribe understood, Jesus responded with one of my all-time favorite lines in Scripture. “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

When we understand that love comes first… we are not far from the kingdom of God.

When we understand that love is meant to include rather than divide… we’re not far from the kingdom of God.

When we understand that love means seeking the least and the last… serving our neighbors—whoever our neighbor may be… we’re not far from the kingdom of God… from the life that really is life… from salvation in the here and now…

We’re not far. We’re close. So close. So close, in fact, there’s just one… more… step.

Actually sharing the love. Actually loving God… and loving neighbors… as Jesus has shown us… those in the center… and those along the margins… until there is no more center and there are no more margins. Because we love them all. Yes, all. Literally… all!

Amen.

1. Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, edited by David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)