Love God and Neighbor

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at Light Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore,
on Sunday, March 6, 2016.

Psalm 89:1-4
Mark 12:28-44

Since Jesus and his disciples arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus has met with opposition from a number of different groups. The temple authorities were not happy about his cleansing the temple, turning over the tables of the moneychangers. Nor were they happy about his popularity with the crowds, who were spellbound by his teaching. So, the chief priests, scribes, and elders of the temple confronted Jesus, questioning his authority. Then they sent some Pharisees and Herodians to try and trap him with a trick question. And then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, also came to argue with him.

But a scribe, who overheard the debate between Jesus and the Sadducees, was impressed with what Jesus had to say. He wanted to hear more from him. So he asks Jesus his own question, not to trick him or entrap him, but to learn from him. “Which commandment is the first of all?” It was a question long debated by the rabbis. There were, after all, 613 commandments in the Torah. Practically speaking, how could anyone remember them, much less follow them all? Wasn’t there some way to prioritize them? Could one commandment be identified from which all the others logically followed? It was a question of first principles.

Jesus responds immediately by quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verses 4 and 5. “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.’” This scripture passage is known as “The Shema,” the Hebrew word for “hear,” which is how it begins: “Hear, O Israel.” The Shema is one of the most important Bible verses in the Jewish tradition. It is central to the liturgy and life of the Jewish community. Indeed, it is as familiar to the average Jew as the Lord’s Prayer is to the average Christian. Observant Jews recite it twice a day. And many Jews nail it to the doorframe of their home in a small decorative box called a mezuzah.

For Jesus, loving God with our whole selves is the first commandment. But Jesus goes on to pair this first commandment with a second: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” “There is no other commandment greater than these,” he says.

And the scribe agrees with him, adding that “this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Here the scribe is lifting up a perspective found often in the Hebrew prophets, that our love of God expressed in worship must also be reflected in our love of neighbor, in how we treat our fellow human beings, especially the poor and powerless.

For example, from Isaiah we read: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. . . . Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the
widow.” Similarly, Amos, also speaking for God, says: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Jesus sees that the scribe gets it, and Jesus commends him: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” For Jesus, love of God and love of neighbor summarized God’s law and should be the bedrock on which one’s faith and life are built. Here, love is not so much an emotion as an action. Love is what we do. Love involves obeying God’s commandments, living out God’s law.

But too often there is a disconnect between our love of God and our love of neighbor. Our worship of God on Sundays doesn’t always square with the conduct of our lives on Monday and the rest of the week. Our worship doesn’t carry over into discipleship.

One of the most extreme examples of this disconnect is powerfully portrayed in the movie “The Godfather.” When Vito Corleone (played by Marlon Brando) dies of a heart attack, his youngest son Michael (played by Al Pacino) realizes that he must take over the crime family. To establish himself as the new boss of the family, he has five people killed, while he is at church attending the baptism of his newborn nephew. As the child’s godfather, Michael, prompted by the priest, proclaims his faith in God -- Father, Son, and Holy Ghost -- and renounces Satan and all his works, at the very same time that the five murders he has ordered are being carried out. It is the ultimate in hypocrisy, a grotesque sham given his complete disregard for the value of human life.

We’ve also seen this disconnect between love of God and love of neighbor in some of the Presidential campaigns this election season. Some candidates profess their faith in God or claim to be Christian or attend a worship service, and then they turn right around and speak about certain groups of people with contempt and hatred (be they Mexicans, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, or the poor).

The first letter of John has something to say about that: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

Now, I don’t imagine that any of us here are planning to commit murder or spew hateful rhetoric against a particular group of people after we leave worship this morning. But the question remains: how does our worship of God on Sundays square with how we treat our neighbors on Mondays? How many of us come to church to meet our spiritual needs on Sunday, but fail to aid neighbors with physical needs on Monday? How many of us happily pass the peace to one another here in church, but pass up opportunities to make peace out in the world? How many of us eagerly listen to scripture, but turn a deaf ear to the cries of the poor? How many of us willingly come forward to share communion, but are not willing to share our bread with the hungry?

As we continue along on our Lenten journey, we follow where Jesus leads us. Eventually, we will end up at the foot of the cross. The cross has two dimensions -- a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension. The vertical dimension represents the relationship human beings have with God. The horizontal dimension represents the relationship human beings have with one another and with the rest of Creation. Many
Christians are tempted to focus on one dimension or the other. Either we focus on the vertical dimension -- on our relationship with God -- through worship, prayer, and study, or we focus on the horizontal dimension -- on our relationship with our neighbors -- through hospitality, fellowship, charity, and advocating for peace, justice, and the integrity of creation. In walking the Christian path, we are meant to hold these two dimensions together -- to love God and to love neighbor. It is a matter of both/and rather than either/or.

So, as Christians, when we leave this sanctuary, let us bring both dimensions of the cross with us, out into the world. Let us deepen the love we have for God at the same time that we broaden the love we have for our neighbors. May it be so. Amen.