

Sunday, October 31, 2021
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 26 (Year B)

Mark 12.28-34

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/572126284045884>

(Sermon begins at about 11:35)

“Hear, O People of God”

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” These words, known as the Shema Yisrael, or simply the Shema, is one of the two most important prayers in all of Judaism. Jews are to say the Shema twice a day, at morning and evening prayers. In fact, it is viewed as the most important part of the Jewish prayer service. So profound is this simple statement to the lives of Jews, that it is traditional for Jews to say the Shema as their last words before they die. More than a prayer, it is a credal statement of their belief in the nature of the one true God. Not unlike our use of the Nicene Creed at Eucharist or the Apostles’ Creed during our services of Morning and Evening Prayer. Only a little more succinct.

The Shema features prominently in today’s scripture readings. In fact, we hear it twice. First, in our Old Testament reading, where we hear the original recitation of the Shema Yisrael by Moses to the people of Israel, as documented in Deuteronomy. That there is but one God and that God is the only God of the people of Israel. Moses goes on to tell the people, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6.5). That the Shema is not just some nice words to recite a couple times a day. More than that, they are to make the Shema and what it means—that they are God’s people—a part of their very being. That the Shema defines who they are at their very core: body and soul. The second time we hear the Shema is straight from Jesus’ mouth in our reading from the Gospel according to Mark. Before we get to why he chooses these particular words, we need to understand the context for him saying them.

At this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He has been to the Temple, where he turned over the booths of the money changers. He has been questioned by the priests and scribes about the source of his authority. He has gone head-to-head with the Temple authorities on such matters as whether it is lawful to pay taxes. He has engaged in a debate with the Sadducees as to whether there is such a thing as resurrection of the dead. And all this within a day or two of Jesus’ final arrival in Jerusalem. All of these encounters further substantiating in the minds of the Temple authorities that Jesus is a heretic, needing to be removed before he poisons the minds of the people. And now, some of the authorities seek to put the nail in the coffin, as it were—or rather, the nails in the cross—to prove once and for all that Jesus is indeed a heretic spreading dangerous and unorthodox ideas. That he must be stopped. And they seek to do this with a simple question: “Which commandment is the first of all?” (Mk 12.28). A seemingly innocent question. A question that you would think would be pretty easy to answer. A question about the first and highest principles when it comes to matters of faith—Jewish faith, as well as what would become the Christian faith. But nooooo. Not in first century Israel.

This simple question, “Which commandment is the first of all” was the cause of much debate among Jews and Gentiles alike. After all, there are 613 commandments. A good scholar of the Torah could make the case for pretty nearly any one of them being the greatest commandment—the one on which the whole faith system depended. Okay, maybe a slight overstatement. I don’t think prohibitions against eating pork or shellfish are the greatest commandments on which all of Judaism rests. The point is, narrowing down the greatest commandment was indeed one of the great theological debates of the day. One that was highly contentious and controversial. And the Temple authorities see this as an opportunity to entrap Jesus in a centuries old theological debate to which there was no satisfactory answer.

But, of course, Jesus does provide a satisfactory answer. More than satisfactory. Masterful, to say the least. Jesus responds with “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” (Mk 12.29-31). You will notice that Jesus pretty much—although not quite—quotes Moses from Deuteronomy. This is significant in several ways.

Rather than separating himself from the Jewish tradition, Jesus is, as I said, quoting Moses. The one who gave the Law to the people. Moses, the one who led the people out of captivity into the Promised Land. All of this making him the greatest prophet in Jewish history. In quoting Moses, Jesus demonstrates that he does know his theological stuff. It is also significant that Jesus chooses to cite the Shema Yisrael as part of his own assessment of the most important commandment. Interestingly, the other Gospels which have parallel discussion of the greatest commandment—Matthew and Luke—do not include the Shema in Jesus’ response. There is no apparent reason why this is the case. It could be a simple redaction issue. But I think it is highly likely Jesus would have included the Shema precisely because of its importance to the people of Israel. That their whole identity as a people is wrapped up in being God’s Chosen People. And maybe a subtle indication, a hint, of who he truly is: the Son of that One God; thereby making him, as we as Christians understand, God himself. A very subtle summation of his credentials. That if anyone knows what the first and greatest commandment is, it would be him. Just a thought.

Another interesting thing about Jesus’ response is that he actually adds to what Moses said. Moses said that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, and might or strength. Jesus adds that we should also love God with all our mind. The ancients had different ideas than we do about the locus of thoughts and emotions. Differing ideas about heart, soul, and mind. So, it is difficult to determine why Jesus added to such a well-known verse, particularly when engaged in verbal and intellectual combat with none other than the Temple authorities. Moses’ original injunction to love God with heart, soul, and might effectively covered the entirety of the person—that was effectively the understanding of “soul.”¹ Jesus’ addition of the need to love God “with all your mind” appears to be a means further emphasizing a key quality. In this case, that the mind emphasized in a broad sense the faculties of perceiving and understanding, but more narrowly had to do with the capacity for spiritual truth and the ability to perceive divine things.² So, in adding the mind to the definition of loving God, Jesus was adding the dimension

of loving God to the point of perceiving and discerning God's will. And then, acting on it. Which naturally leads to what Jesus says next: "the second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mk 12.31).

In connecting these two commandments—loving God and loving neighbor—Jesus is taking two commandments and effectively making them one. That we are to love the one true God with our whole being, with everything we have and everything we are. But there is only one truly meaningful way to do that. By doing what is of highest importance to God: by insuring the wellbeing of all God's creation. By taking care of all God's creation. It's about demonstrating in tangible ways our love for God. We demonstrate that we love God by caring for what and who God loves. If we are not doing what we can to care for God's beloved creation, how can we truly say that we love God? Or, as the Apostle John so aptly put it, "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" (1 John 4.20-21).

In responding the way he does, in connecting the commandment to love God to the commandment to love our neighbors, Jesus takes the debate out of the purely theoretical into the realm of the practical. Into the real world. If we love God, if we truly love God, we demonstrate that love in tangible ways. By caring for the needs of others. How else can one begin to demonstrate love for an omnipotent, omnipresent God—a God that we cannot point to and see directly—except through care of what God has created? Or in the words of the scribe who put Jesus on the hotseat to begin with: "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" (Mk 12.32-33). Not that Jesus needed his validation. But at least the scribe seemed to get it. Offerings and sacrifices are all well and good as a sign. But what do they really accomplish in the long run? As God himself says to the prophet Hosea, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings" (Hos 6.6). In adding love of neighbor, Jesus has provided a definition for, a means to, showing steadfast love.

Think of it this way. How do you show your spouse, your partner, your children, your friends, that you care for them? Of course, there are lots of ways. But one of the easiest is to spend time with them doing what they want to do. Doing what they care about doing. Sharing in their interests and concerns. Same with God. Nothing delights God more than when we show our love for him by loving others in his name. And in the process, our actions serve to demonstrate God's love for those we are ministering to—often times to those who otherwise would not know God's love.

While the Shema Yisrael may be central to the Jewish faith, it is also, central to our faith. Precisely because Jesus frames it as the cornerstone for what we know and believe to be the "Great Commandment." To paraphrase: Hear O people of God: you are God's beloved children. Love God with all that you are and with all that you have. And show that love in any way that you can, everywhere that you can, to everyone that you can.

¹ Jeff A. Benner, "Getting to the Heart and Soul of the Matter," Ancient Hebrew Research Center, October 29, 2021. <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/studies-words/getting-to-the-heart-and-soul-of-the-matter.htm>.

² "Bible Dictionary: Define Mind, Definition of Mind," SeekFind.net, October 29, 2021. <http://www.seekfind.net/mind.html#YXxHaZrMJPa>.