

the same way we love our neighbor, is part of the greatest commandment. If the widow felt compelled to put in the last two coins she had, was she foregoing the things she needed just to stay alive—food, shelter, clothing?

Many Bibles translate the verse about the widow's gift saying "she put in everything she had to live on." Which seems to refer only to the money. But the Greek word used to describe what she put in the treasury is the word for "whole." It translates as 'everything.' So perhaps what the widow actually gave was less about the money. Rather, she gave everything; her whole life. This is why the comparison between her and the religious leaders is so stark. She gave her whole life, while they gave barely anything, as they only focused on their own pride, honor, and admiration.

Surely the widow's gift of her whole life is a gift that can only be given in love. Think of marriage, parenting or being an auntie or uncle, chosen families, lifelong friendships. There, we give ourselves to each other and we do it in love, whatever may come. Jesus' life is the fullest illustration of giving one's whole self. That is what the incarnation was about: God giving God's whole self to us out of love. That is what Jesus' death and resurrection will be about: Jesus giving his whole self out of love, refusing to fight back, choosing to offer wholeness to the world not by strength, but through love that looked like weakness. The widow, I think, did love herself—and God, and others—enough to give the fullness of herself to her faith. Loving yourself at the same time you love others can include some sacrifices, some things that look awfully strange to people on the outside. But if anyone could recognize the widow's gift of her whole self, given in love, surely it was Jesus.

This is what we keep talking about this season. Give more than you expect. Offer your whole life. Love with all that you are. This following Jesus is not something we can do half-way. It demands our full selves and the turning over of our lives to what God intends, instead of what we like best. Discipleship is not for the faint of heart, they say. But we are able to live into its high calling because we do it in relationship with a God who loves us. A God who invites us to ask questions, never responding with blind faith, but always with thoughtful gratitude and love, even to ourselves.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



March 10, 2024

Fourth Sunday in Lent

*"Love with all your mind and might"*

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Mark 12:28-44

As I shared in my article in this month's Church Bell Newsletter, the world feels very Lent-y right now. As in, there are a lot of things that tie in with the lengthening shadows of Jesus's journey toward the cross: wars in the world, tough economics at home, the deaths of loved ones, the challenging politics of an election year, and so on. It can be really hard to know how to process everything. And what are we to do in the face of it all?

In our story today, a religious leader came to Jesus and asked which of God's commandments was first? Which is like saying, *what is the most important thing?* And Jesus responded: love. Love is most important. Love of God. Love of neighbor. And yes, love of self. Love, I think, is the only answer to that question facing us, too. What do we do in the face of heartbreak or death or sorrow? We love.

Our theme this season is *A Higher Calling*. It's a reminder that following Jesus asks a lot of us. Often more than we expect or maybe wish to give. But today's reading offers another view. Though the life of faith is complex, though big questions and hard problems will confound us, what God intends for our lives can still be summed up briefly. Rabbi Hillel, who lived around the time of Jesus, showed how concise the summation of the commandment could be. The story goes that a potential Jewish convert asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah, or Jewish instructions, while standing on one foot. Hillel didn't miss a beat and said "That which is hateful to you, do not do to others. All the rest is commentary." How you treat people, how you share love is what matters. Everything else is just details. Love for God, others, and ourselves is an idea we can hold onto and one we can grasp. That doesn't mean that *love* is simple. Surely we all know that it is not. But the idea that love is the heart of our faith is fundamental and true.

Karl Barth, theologian in our Reformed tradition, wrote, "Love is the essence of Christian living. It is the [indispensable and essential action] in every conceivable connection. Wherever the Christian life...is good before God, the good thing about it is love."<sup>1</sup>

1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 1 / 2*, p. 372.

2 Greg Cootsona, "AI and You: Perfect Together?" *Science for the Church* newsletter, January 23, 2024.

3 William Placher, *Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 174.

4 Ibid.

In what he told the scribe about love, Jesus was riffing on the Ten Commandments given to Moses. And when we look at how those are grouped, we see that the first five focus on love for God. That attitude and feeling rightly comes first. Love for God is called forth because God is our creator, the one who breathed life into us and who still sustains us. Love for God is a recognition of who God is and a reminder of our humility. Love for God is a grateful response to God's love for us.

Our love for God doesn't just happen though. Love almost never happens because it is something we are *told* to do. Love emerges in the midst of our relationship *with God*. If, by luck and circumstance, we are brought into relationship with God; if we hear of God's grace and love for us, just as we are; if we see and feel that love lived out by the people around us; if we are trained to notice God's love in the world, then our grateful response of love toward God is likely to emerge. The relationship, the being together, the shared presence is how our love develops. Last weekend, children and families in our church gathered for our Adventure in Worship workshop. Together we learned more about baptism, communion, and the organ, where the lucky kids even got to play a few notes! Learning about worship, the why and how, the rhythms, the rituals, is one way we are helping to strengthen the kids' relationship with God, so that their love for God can bloom.

Relationships are tricky. We're all pretty aware of that. And a relationship with God, where we sometimes have trouble perceiving God's presence or knowing exactly what God is saying can sometimes be challenging. To try to make it easier, someone has created a new app for your phone called *Text Jesus*. The description invites users to, "Discover a new, interactive way to engage with your faith. [This] revolutionary AI-powered chat bot app, [is] designed for devoted Christians seeking a deeper connection with the Bible's most iconic figures." Apparently on the app, you send out a text message and get a text back from what the artificial intelligence creates to sound like the voice of the apostles, Moses, or even Jesus himself. One writer who gave it a try said, "I found this troubling because I personally want a real encounter with God through worship, prayer, reading Scripture, or service. But it's possible that the app's users don't care [if] they're being fed AI-generated divine answers as long as it feels like God is talking."<sup>2</sup>

I don't know if that so-called relationship with God can create actual love for God or not. It's hard to share love with a machine. Something is bound to be missing. And Jesus, when he talked with the scribe, didn't intend just a positive attitude toward God; or the sharing of emojis and "lol's." Jesus asked for something complete. A real relationship where love blossoms. And in such a relationship, even one with God, there is give and take, heartbreak and joy, silence and conversation. Love means that a relationship is dynamic and full:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.

There's one of those we should take note of here. The Ten Commandments include heart, soul and strength. Jesus added *mind*. So the mind must be significant. Jesus wants us to think. It's not blind love or unexamined love for God that's intended. But thoughtful, considered love. As William Placher writes, "Christian faith does not imply there are thoughts we should not explore, questions we should not ask, or subjects we should not investigate. To have faith in God with all our mind is precisely to believe that nothing we can learn or discover could ever be a threat to belief in God." We're to go out and learn and question and wonder and think. And we should be suspicious of any preacher or teacher who tells us otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

It is that dynamic and full-bodied love of God that sets us up to love our neighbors. The second five of the Ten Commandments deal with how we interact with other people, which is where Jesus gets his shorthand for it. Care for others, on its own, is not unique to our faith. Most people support serving others. Many folks bring their families to church solely to instill the values of kindness and caring in their children; or maybe in themselves. But out in the world, such service and care are rarely grounded in love. Caring for others is often seen as a duty of citizenship, or the right way to live, or the way to be a good participant in your community. Which are all nice motivations. But when our love for *God* motivates our love for others, the end result sometimes looks similar, but it often feels very different.

Last year our S.T.A.G.E. youth group started partnering with a new host organization for their summer mission trip. Our new partner is called *Be the Neighbor*. Its focus is not just on getting our hands dirty to build houses or plant a community garden. Those things are nice and they make us, the people doing the work, feel good. But *Be the Neighbor* is focused on building relationships in the midst of our doing. They educate the young people about the root causes of poverty or injustice, so that they can work for changes when they get back home to their own neighborhoods. They help students get to know the people they are helping, so they can be changed by the stories they hear. They seek to build and sustain real relationships. The goal of the mission trip is not just service. But rather living out our love for God at the same as we cultivate love for our neighbors. Who of course, as Jesus tells us in other places, means just about everyone. Or as Placher writes, "there should be no limits on who counts as a neighbor."<sup>4</sup>

So what about that widow who put her last two coins into the Temple treasury? She seemed to be loving God because she was giving to God's house at the temple. Check! She seemed to be loving her neighbor because the temple treasury was intended, in its best sense, to care for widows, orphans, and vulnerable people. Check! But was she loving herself? Jesus said love for self,