

Proper 26B 2018 Sermon

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard the Sadducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus 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.

There are 613 laws and commandments in the Jewish book of Law, the Torah, — 248 *positive* commandments, ordering the people to perform some act; and 365 *negative* commandments, ordering the people to **abstain** from certain acts. ¹

But what strikes me about the two commandments that Jesus says are the *greatest* is that they aren’t about either *performing* an outward act **or** *abstaining* from an outward act; they are about being **inwardly** grounded in love: loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loving our neighbor as ourself. These 2 commandments are about our *inner* state, our interior disposition and consciousness; the state of our heart. And I think that is why Jesus says, in *Matthew’s* version of this story, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” ² Because if we get our *interior* self right, if we get our *heart* right, we won’t have to remember all of those 600+ laws saying what actions should be **taken** or what actions should be **avoided**; for right actions *will naturally proceed* from a heart centered on love of God and love of neighbor.

And is this not Jesus’ main criticism of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes — that while they may follow the **outward** *letter* of the Law, **inside**, their hearts are not centered on God, but on self and ego?

In *Matthew’s* Gospel, Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees, “You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me...’” ³ “... For you clean the **outside** of the cup and of the plate, but **inside** they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.” ⁴

Clean the inside — and the outside becomes clean, also.

My friends, I think that, like the Pharisees, you and I can easily fall into the trap of feeling confident that we are good people because we outwardly follow the law: we don't murder; we don't steal; we don't cross the border illegally. But refraining from illegal outward acts, having the *outside* of our cup clean, says **nothing** about the *inside*; and as God said to the Prophet Samuel, "[humans] look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." ⁵

The two Great Commandments, on which hang all the Law and the Prophets, are commands to clean the inside of our cup; to ground our hearts in the love of God and neighbor.

In recent years, even secular business leadership experts are finding that focusing on *outward* behaviors and results is not enough! Otto Scharmer is an international expert on organization development and transformation. A Senior Lecturer at MIT and chair of the MIT IDEAS program, Scharmer has delivered award-winning leadership and innovation programs for corporations including Hewlett Packard, Price Waterhouse, Fujitsu, Federal Express, Shell Oil, Nissan Motors, and Google. In creating change in the management of a corporation, Scharmer says that (and I quote): "What counts is not **what** leaders do and **how** they do it but their *interior condition*, the inner place from which they operate or the source **from** which all their actions originate." ⁶

The primary battlefield, Scharmer has found, is not the organization or what actions will achieve results; rather, the primary battlefield is within the interior of the leader. Leaders need to (and again I quote Scharmer) "Shift the Inner Place from which [they] operate." ⁷

Several times in the past few years, I have shown a short video clip to Vestry or Adult Forum or our *Faith-Seeking Journey* class about the young comedian Michael Junior, who says that his "big break" didn't come when he got to perform on the Tonight Show; his big break came when he shifted his interior. In the past, he, like many comedians, felt that his goal was to get laughs from the audience. But now, instead of *him* trying to **get** laughs (the focus being on what **he** gets), he now sees his purpose as giving the audience an opportunity to laugh – which is something we human beings all need: the opportunity to laugh! Michael Junior says the minute he changed his interior stance toward his comedy, the reaction of the audience changed: suddenly, audience members were staying after the performance to talk with him, and to share jokes with him. He now takes his gift of comedy into prisons and hospitals where people desperately need the opportunity to laugh. ⁸

My friends, you and I know that people can sense when we are coming from an interior space of generosity and genuine concern and love for them, or whether we are coming from a space of polite detachment or self-focused "What's in this for me?" People can tell when you and I are really listening to – and caring about –

what they are saying, or when we are just waiting for the opportunity to talk, ourselves.

So, if the 2 Greatest Commandments are instructions to ground our hearts and minds in the love of God and neighbor, how do we *do* that? How do we **get** to that loving heart-stance?

I believe the first thing we must realize is that we can't **think** ourselves there, or get there by reasoning; nor can we come to a loving heart-stance by force of will. We don't **strive** to obey the 2 Great Commandments, since, quite frankly, **we can't** get there. But **God** can *bring* us there. God will not force us, of course; we must allow God in. But then, as the members of AA are fond of saying, we "let go and let God." We surrender our tight hold and control of our lives, knowing that we can't get to our loving heart-space (which is our True Selves) by way of control; only God can bring us there, bring us home, when we surrender our tight-fisted control of our lives.

Now, at first, this idea of letting go of control, surrendering, may seem frightening or ridiculous. For in the win-lose kingdom of our world today, to "surrender" is to *lose*, and to *lose* is shame. The Great Commandment of the kingdom of **this** world – so clearly displayed this election week – seems to be, "Win at all costs! Defeat [or, in some cases, destroy] the opponent by saying every bad thing possible about them!" But, my friends, it is the opposite in the kingdom of **God**. The operative rule in the kingdom of **God** is not that our ego-self *wins*; it is that our ego-self *loses*, as Jesus teaches, over and over, saying, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."⁹ Those who *lose* their life – who surrender, *let go* of their ego-self, anchored in the values of this world – will save their True life, their Life in God.

And yet, so many professed Christians believe and act in an opposite way, thinking they must "win for God." My friends, this is NOT the heart or attitude of Jesus! As Richard Rohr states: "Religion has largely become 'holding on' instead of letting go. **God**, it seems to me, does the holding on (to us!), and **we** must learn the letting go."¹⁰

How do we learn the letting go? I have already said that we, by our own thinking or will-power, cannot get to our true Home, that heart-space within each of us wherein love abides. What we *can* do is to remove obstacles within ourselves which block us from coming to this heart of love, our True Self in God, our True Home. We can, to a certain degree, clean out the inside of our cup, looking inside ourselves in prayerful reflection and seeing where our attitudes are far from the attitude of Christ, and bringing these realizations to the surface of our consciousness, where their power is lessened. But ultimately, **we** will never be able, of our own will and efforts, to clean the inside of our cup completely; only

the indwelling Spirit of God can do that. So, we *surrender* to that Spirit. We let go, and we let God.

And the principal way that we can do that is through self-emptying¹¹ prayer. Not the kind of prayer that bombards God with our wants and desires and intercessions (not that those prayers are bad!), but the kind of prayer that makes space for God. Silent prayer; waiting prayer; listening prayer; self-opening prayer. Several of us have found Centering Prayer to be a simple and effective form of opening our heart-space, so that the Holy Spirit of God can enter in and abide in us. But whatever receptive prayer practice you choose, *practice* it, daily. For the forces of this world are strong indeed which shout out that we must win at all costs, with the all-too-often result that God, and our neighbor, lose.

AMEN

¹ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_commandments)

² Matthew 22:40

³ Matthew 15:7-8

⁴ Matthew 23:25b-26

⁵ 1 Samuel 16:7

⁶ https://ai.wu.ac.at/~kaiser/birgit/Scharmer-paper/Theory_U_Intro.pdf

⁷ Otto Scharmer: *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2013, p. 1
http://www.ottoscharmer.com/sites/default/files/e2e_ulab.pdf , p. 1

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2MORc0ZCo8>

⁹ Mark 8:35; Matthew 16:25; Luke 9:24, 17:33; John 12:25

¹⁰ <https://danutm.wordpress.com/2012/07/30/richard-rohr-the-art-of-letting-go/>

¹¹ on Christ's self-emptying, see Philippians 2:6-7

¹² for a brochure on Centering Prayer, see

https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/sites/default/files/private/method_cp_eng-2016-06_0.pdf