

Proper 26B 2021 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, requiring the Jewish people to perform some act (like offering a sacrifice in the Temple); and 365 *negative* commandments, requiring the people to **abstain** from certain acts (like working on the Sabbath).¹

But what strikes me about the **two** commandments that Jesus, in today’s Gospel, says are the *greatest*, is that they aren’t about either *performing* an outward act **or** *abstaining* from an outward act; instead, 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** and what actions should be **avoided**; because right actions *will naturally proceed* from a heart centered in 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 status 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 wear our seat belts. 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, whom you have heard me mention before, 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, Federal Express, Shell Oil, Nissan Motors, and Google. In creating change in the management and culture 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 Not **what** leaders do and **how** they do it but their *interior condition*, the inner place from which they operate; the source **from** which all their actions originate.

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

My friends, you and I know that people can sense when we are coming from an interior space of genuine concern and love for them, or whether we are just "going through the motions," engaging them on the surface, *not* engaging them from our heart, our soul-space. 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. That modern-day saint Mr. Rogers put it this way: "It's our insides that make us who we are, that allow us to dream and wonder and feel for others. That's what's essential. That's what will always make the biggest difference in our world."⁸ (unquote) That's why his children's television program, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, ran for 33 years. Children and parents trusted Fred Rogers because they trusted the inner place from which he was coming; they trusted his heart.

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 a loving heart-stance is our **natural** mode of being. It's what we were created for! The 20th-Century priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "We are not human beings having spiritual experiences; we are spiritual beings having human experiences."⁹ We are spiritual beings having human experiences. We were created in the image and likeness of God, and *that* is our **True** Self, our true heart and soul. When we are living from that heart space, that soul space, our True Self, then our words and actions will flow out from that space in a wellspring of love for God and neighbor.

Our problem is that we *forget* that this is our True Identity; and we come to believe, instead, that we have to create our own selves – create a worthy self to present to the world, a self assembled from the many worldly identities that we *think* will make us acceptable or strong or smart or attractive or defiant or special, or a loyal member of this or that tribe – be it political, religious, ethnic, nationalistic, or whatever. It is when we live from any or all of these *self-fabricated* identities that we find our actions to be motivated and empowered *not* by love of God and neighbor, but by a desire to protect and **defend** those worldly identities we mistakenly think are our True Selves.

To return to our True Selves, who we are in God, and re-center our lives in that heart-space from whence flows love of God and neighbor, we might do well to remember that mantra of Alcoholics Anonymous: "Let go and let God." Surrender our tight hold and control over our fabricated identities. "Find the quiet center," as our hymn says, by allowing whatever is *blocking* us from our **True** Selves to fall away.

Now, admittedly, this idea of letting go of control, surrendering, may at first seem frightening – or, in the eyes of the world – absurd! 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 in the politically-driven divisions that plague our nation – seems to be, "Win at all costs! Defeat – even destroy – the opponent!" (We conveniently *forget* Jesus' command to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us! -*Luke 6:27*)

Fox News anchor Neil Cavuto, who has survived stage 4 cancer, open heart surgery, and multiple sclerosis, recently contracted COVID-19, experiencing problems breathing and concentrating and a loss of taste and smell. In his broadcast, he credited the fact that he had been fully vaccinated with saving his life, and he encouraged his listeners to get vaccinated, not only for their own sake, but for the sake of others. In response, he received death threats.¹⁰

It is the *opposite* in the kingdom of **God**, which, Jesus says, is *within* us.¹¹ 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.”¹² Those who *lose* their *fabricated* life and surrender, *let go* of their ego-self, will *save* their True Life, their Life in God.

And one way that we can encourage and nurture the “letting go” of our ego selves is through self-emptying¹³ 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, deep within. Silent prayer; waiting prayer; listening prayer; self-opening prayer. Be it Centering Prayer,¹⁴ a daily practice of gratitude, or some other form of regular self-emptying, the purpose is the opening of our heart-space, wherein resides our True Self. Christ Himself is our example, for, as St. Paul notes, “Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but *emptied* himself...”¹⁵

Whatever form of self-emptying you choose to practice, *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 we lose what truly matters. 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://quotefancy.com/quote/807311/Fred-Rogers-It-s-our-insides-that-make-us-who-we-are-that-allow-us-to-dream-and-wonder>

⁹ <https://www.wellnesscompass.org/podcasts/the-wellness-compass-podcast/episodes/2147619799>

¹⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/27/1049664531/fox-anchor-neil-cavuto-covid-19-vaccine-death-threats>

¹¹ Luke 17:21, NIV

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

¹³ on Christ’s self-emptying, see Philippians 2:6-7

¹⁴ for a brochure on Centering Prayer, see

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

¹⁵ Philippians 2:6-7a