

“Words of Love”

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Mark 12:28-34

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹ Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ 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.’ ³¹ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³² 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’; ³³ 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.” ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Do you know those *matryoshka*? Russian nesting dolls? They’re beautiful wooden dolls that break apart to reveal another doll inside. Open that one and there’s another inside and inside that one until you get to the smallest doll. God’s Law is a little like *matryoshka*. Inside the 66 books of the bible are 613 Torah laws. Religious leaders codified these into 248 positive command and 365 prohibitions. Some people narrow this to 10 Commandments. Nested inside all of those are two simple yet profound commandments.

A scribe asks a question that has been debated for centuries. Some leaders claim the positive commands were most important. Others say the prohibitions are. Which do you say, Jesus? Jesus begins by quoting the Shema, from Deuteronomy. “Listen, Israel! Our God is the Lord! Only the Lord! Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength.”

We’re not talking here about emotional love. The love Jesus speaks of is purposeful. A love of hard decisions and sacrifice. A love that preferentially chooses in favor of the others’ needs. We’re going to take the commandments’ words apart.

In the bible, the word heart means one’s entire inner being – physical, emotional, spiritual – everything that governs our lives. Loving God with all your heart means loving deeply and personally.

Soul refers to a person’s life – sleeping, waking, laughing, every minute of every day. Soul is both who and what you are. I’m a mother, pastor, sister, friend, child of God... Loving God with all your soul means allowing God to define who and what you are.

Jesus adds mind; that’s not in the Shema. Mind refers to our ideas and views. Loving God with all your mind means submitting your thoughts, opinions and decisions to God.

Strength is about our abilities, talents, and physical energies. It’s about where you put your efforts – your work or school, and your free time.

Did you notice this commandment does not say “with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” What it says is “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all

your strength.” The original writer, and Jesus, place equal emphasis on each aspect of love. Ours is to be a holistic love – essentially, you’re to love God with every fiber of your being.

Jesus’ second commandment is about neighbor love. 1st century rabbis argued about the meaning of the word neighbor. Most of them understood a neighbor as a Jew who strictly observed the Law. Jesus’ goal is to broaden that definition, so he tells a story about a kind, helpful stranger – what we call The Good Samaritan. Through this story, we discover that the question we need to ask ourselves is not, “Who is my neighbor?” but, “Am I being a neighbor?”

People can be hard to love. Linus van Pelt famously shouted, “I love mankind; it’s people I can’t stand.” Even church folk can be hard to love. Or our families. One man told his wife that if she’d really loved him she would’ve married someone else.

How are we to make love our defining characteristic?

Gary Chapman (in *The Five Love Languages*) identifies five primary ways people express and receive love: words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, physical touch and gifts.

On Wednesday, Bernice showed off a Valentine she’d received. It’s great! Snoopy’s on front. It plays “Linus and Lucy.” But when she turned it so I could see the inside, I asked if I could borrow it for today. You probably can’t read where you’re sitting, but the inside is filled with all sorts of affirmations: Sweet! Kind! Thoughtful! Funny! Clever! Unique! Wonderful!

We can use words to support those around us. Did you know it takes six positives to offset one negative. How well are you practicing love in this way?

We also show love by spending quality time – with God through worship and devotion, and with people by listening, by playing or doing most anything together, by facing them and giving them our attention.

We don’t perform act of service for God directly but every time we serve another person, aren’t we serving God? And the way you give God a gift is by giving to another. We touch God with every caring touch we offer another individual.

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’... I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me” (Mt 25:37-40).

Loving God means loving people. And loving people means going out of our way, getting out of our comfort zones, rearranging our schedules and using what we have to meet the needs of those around us. When you wrap your arms around someone who needs a hug, you’re fulfilling the greatest commandments. When you send sleep mats to people in India or money for safe stoves to people in Guatemala, when you leave an envelope of cash for someone struggling to pay their rent, you’re loving neighbor and God. When you shovel an frail neighbor’s driveway, you are living God’s love.

“This is how everyone will know you’re my disciples,” Jesus says, “when you love each other” (John 13:35). People know – not because we talk the good talk or have a fish decal on our car. Christianity is not about coming to church on Sunday. It’s a way of life. Only when Jesus’ priority of love lived out through compassion and justice each day is ours a Christian faith.

God gives us the freedom to make our own choices, yet as Christ-followers we accept that love is our priority. Everything we do or say must pass through a filter of love. Whenever we're hesitant, not sure what to do, we can put everything into this "God's love" filter, or colander. Then we give it a good shake and ask ourselves, or each other, "Does this reflect God's love?" Everything that is not saturated with God's love needs to drain away. Okay, it's not as easy as it is with pasta; still, this offers a good rubric for life. "Which choice most reflects God's love?"

You can also ask yourself... Does this act of love value the other person? Love can be a lovely, warm feeling, but true love requires an active interest in the well-being of another, always seeking the highest good. Does this love leave me vulnerable? For love exposes the heart. C. S. Lewis (in *The Four Loves*) describes it this way:

"To love is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one... Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe... But... it will change. It will not be broken. Instead, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable..."

Does this act of love demand anything of me? For love costs. It goes out on the limb and does the unexpected.

Bob Pierce, founder of the relief agency World Vision, had advanced leukemia. He decided to visit a colleague in Indonesia before he died. As he and others walked through a village, they came upon a girl near the river lying on a bamboo mat. She was dying of cancer. The friend explained that she wasn't at a clinic because she wanted to spend her last days near the river where it was cool and familiar.

Bob got down in the mud and took her hand. He prayed for her. Then she spoke. "What did she say?" "She said, 'If I could only sleep again, if I could only sleep again.'" Her pain didn't allow sleep.

Bob took out the sleeping pills his doctor had given him for his own pain. "You make sure this young lady gets a good night's sleep, as long as these pills last." He was ten days away from where he could get his prescription refilled. His love would cost him, yet even so, he was filled with a sense that he'd done the right thing.

Another thing about love is that it forgives. It doesn't hold grudges. We are not supposed face abuse or become doormats, but love always costs.

When you want to see what love looks like, look at the Jesus. Love is incarnate in his person – in everything he does and everything he says. The apostle Paul writes about fruit of the Spirit.

When we practice God's love, then joy and peace grow within us, patience and kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These aren't gifts we receive. They are the fruit of a life lived after Jesus' example. When you want to know how well you're loving God and neighbor, look to the fruit you're bearing.

Our text this morning offers us a life perspective. Knowing our purpose and having goals to meet this purpose give us vision. This vision, this love incarnate, can make all the difference.

This Lent, I invite you to remember that Christ has no hands but our hands, no voice but our voice. When we love as we are loved, God can make a world of difference through us. We will grow closer to our God, closer to our friends and our neighbors. And people will notice.

Amen.