

# Hopkins South Monterey

## United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

October 31, 2021

Pastor Kelsey

Mark 12:28-34

NRSV

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." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

## Prayers & Sermon

*Loving and Gracious God,*

*Thank you for this time together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.*

Today being a fun family holiday, I figured we can all take a little extra Children's time. Especially as sometimes childhood stories have the clearest lessons. So I have a halloween themed story to start us off this morning.

The thing I love about this story is that it shows the power of love without being super obvious about it. This little old lady who isn't afraid of anything is not afraid of all these things she encounters in the forest, and we expect her to be afraid because by what we know should be scary, these floating pieces of clothing making spooky noises tick a bunch of "scary" boxes. But she doesn't get afraid until the very end, when it is the super spooky pumpkin. And even then, there isn't any shame that she was afraid. Her bravery card is not taken away. She is afraid and that's okay. But that isn't where she stays and it doesn't affect the way she treats the knocking pieces of clothing. Instead, she continues to see the best in each of those floating items, even the one that truly did scare her, and saw the potential they had to be something good and positive. Yes, this woman who isn't afraid of anything shows a lot of bravery, but behind that bravery is her choice to love her neighbor, no matter what they look like or how much they make her fear. Even when fear overcomes her bravery a bit, she doesn't let it overcome her love for these unexpected neighbors and she welcomes them into her home and life.

The power of love over fear is our theme for today. Over the last handful of weeks, except for last week, we have been walking through stories of Jesus answering questions with teachings on how we can better live out God's Kingdom. Each of the teachings have led us to some core values that Jesus wants us to live out in comparison to the way the world, our culture and society, most often tells us to live. We first looked at Violence versus Shalom, then hoarding versus sharing, then competition versus cooperation. Today, we are taking a look at this more well known question from the scribe and Jesus's answer of the two greatest commandments, and will look at how this story reminds us to live out love instead of fear.

There are a couple of things I want to make clear about this theme from the beginning. During this pandemic, we have often heard faith vs. fear as the opposite comparison. That is not today's message. Faith and Fear aren't really opposites, in fact, it is pretty common to think of faith as even when we fear something, we hold onto faith. Faith and Fear are kinda friends. The true opposite of fear is love. When we truly love someone, we will not treat them out of fear. It is about our mindset and actions. That said, I also want to be clear that the fear and love I am talking about today is about how we feel about and treat God and neighbor. This is not about fear of all things or general fear. This is about our mindsets that lead to how we treat others and build community. Fear is not inherently bad. Fear is an important core emotion for all of us as humans. A healthy amount of fear about certain things can do us a lot of good. You are not failing your love of God and neighbor when you are afraid of heights or of getting sick, or of a serial murder. And, as the book about the little old lady modeled for us, there is not shame in feeling fear. It is an emotion that, like all emotions, we can rarely control very well. What matters is what we let take control of how we think about God and how we treat our fellow neighbors. When we let fear take the driver's seat, instead of love, we don't make decisions that lead to the flourishing and well-being of all.

So the love part is pretty easy to figure out from reading our scripture this morning, but what about the fear side? Well, that comes from the setting and those that Jesus is interacting with during this pivotal teaching on love. Jesus is practicing what he preaches as he is preaching it here. The bit of story we read this morning starts out not

that differently than many others that tell of Jesus talking to the public. A lot of stories that Jesus is part of and tells simplifies the characters into as few groups as possible and they are often opposed. When we imagine ourselves in the stories, it is easy to slip into an us versus them mindset. This us versus them mindset is fed by our fear of others. Though Jesus often uses this as a lesson or story-telling technique, Jesus does not want us to make this the mindset that we use in our daily life and in our interactions with others. Today's scripture is one of those interactions that remind us that Jesus doesn't want us to generalize and make assumptions, especially negative or fearful ones, about any person or group of people.

In the stories leading up to this part of Mark 12 we hear about the Pharisees and Scribes and other Jewish leaders, and we most often see them questioning, doubting, and testing Jesus. So when we hear that the person with a question in our story today is a Scribe, we may make some assumptions about his intentions. We might fear what test he is going to throw at Jesus. But when we look at what is actually said in the text, it says that this Scribe comes to Jesus because he thought Jesus answered the other testing questions so well. A bold break of the mold of his peers who were untrusting of Jesus. He seems to be sincerely intrigued, and wants to know more of Jesus's insight. He and Jesus actually have a conversation and it ends with telling us this Scribe is "blessed." The conversation begins as the Scribe asks Jesus a legitimate question, that gets to the point of some of the true concerns of the Jewish community at that time and the Christian community today, "What is the most important commandment for us to live by and follow?" This question is asking what it means to be faithful to God and God's commands.

Jesus answers the scribe's question by combining a couple of teachings from the Old Testament, AKA the Hebrew scriptures that were all they had at that time. He first quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, plus a little addition: '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 he inserts] -and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' Jesus brings a new twist to this teaching by saying the second is this, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself," which is from Leviticus 19:18. By pairing these two separate teachings together, Jesus is not contradicting the tradition but is bringing an uncommon interpretation of the two. By pairing these two commandments together, Jesus is saying that Loving God is about what is in our heart, our understanding, our motivation, and our action. And all of those together is the way we become part of the Kingdom of God. Jesus's point to this scribe who was all about getting the technicalities right when it comes to his love of God was being reminded that it is just as important to pay attention to how he treats his neighbors. And we are to treat them with love.

The Scribe seems to get it. He reflects back to Jesus the main points of those commands and highlights that Loving our one God with all that we are and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all the performative rituals that make up our religion. Jesus then blesses the Scribe by telling him he is not far from the Kingdom of God because he understands what Jesus taught as well as he could in that moment.

Through this unexpected conversation from this unexpected pair, Jesus and the Scribe, we are given some deeper insight into Jesus's intention in this teaching of the greatest

two commandments. Jesus adds that we should love God with all our minds alongside our hearts, souls, and strength. The Scribe rewords this as loving God with “all the understanding.” This tells us that there is something important about what goes on in our mind when it comes to loving God and neighbor. Just as loving our neighbors is part of loving God, how and what we think about our neighbors shapes our relationship with God, just as how our Love of God should shape how we treat our neighbors and live out our lives as followers of Jesus. So we should be asking ourselves: How and what do we think of our neighbors? Let’s dive into where this gets trickier: How and what do we think of our neighbors who disagree with us? What about our neighbors that are very different than us? What about our neighbors who aren’t literally our neighbors but are across the world from us?

Those last few questions are trickier because, even though it is hard to admit and face, there is a lot in our American society in recent years in particular, that encourages us to fear those who disagree with us, fear those who are different from us, fear all those who are from specific countries or cultures or races or religions. Even those that have worked through those fears and stereotypes can get trapped in fear of doing something about hate and injustice or fear of doing or saying the wrong thing themselves. Jesus reminds us with these two commandments that what takes root in our hearts and minds about any of our neighbors in the world is wrapped up in our love for God. We are called to have love be the foundation of our hearts, minds, souls, and strength. We are called to love those that are different from us, love those that society tells us to fear for whatever reason. We are called to not make assumptions about others based on stereotypes or generalizations, but instead approach them with love and hope for the best.

Now, to be clear, this is about the motivations of our minds and hearts and how we approach people. If someone does something to you or has proven to be harmful or dangerous to you or others, fearing them is not a failure to God. Properly protecting yourself from a truly dangerous situation is not failing God. Jesus is not telling us that we can never fear an individual, but is telling us that the primary motivation in our hearts and minds should be love to be part of the Kingdom of God. When we live out of love instead of fear we shatter our us versus them groups and instead create opportunities to see the best in others and live in harmony. Just like the little old lady who saw the best out of the scary clothes that followed her home and saw the way their gifts could have a positive impact in their community.

Even though we like to think about Halloween as a holiday all about fear and scares, the way we celebrate halloween by decorating our neighborhoods and sharing candy with young people through trick or treat is actually all about coming together as a community and sharing our love for each other. May we love all of our neighbors tonight as we see them, no matter what they come to our door looking like, and take that love of all our neighbors into our daily lives.

This is a Halloween blessing by liturgy group Enfleshed, for all who aspire to be nightmares when evil sleeps too peacefully.

Let us pray.

Listen,  
God is howling at the moon.  
Let the strange come out of hiding.  
Let imagination rise from the grave.  
Let all who are named  
Freak, Monster, Weirdo, or That Which Others Should Fear  
call out to the gifts in each other.  
When destruction is made normal,  
we need all the wild, all the odd, all the unusual we can get.  
Blessed be the tricksters, stirring up trouble when evil desires calm.  
Praise God for the prophets who linger with us like ghosts.  
Hallelujah to the children,  
Knocking on the hearts of strangers,  
chasing joy from door to door.  
When evil is lurking in broad daylight,  
we practice our courage in the night.  
Nourish that which has bite,  
Unleash the impulse to scream,  
Feed the desire to haunt the unjust.  
Let us keep trying on possibilities like costumes,  
until we discover the ones  
that will leave evil  
trembling  
Amen.