Reformation

October 31, 2021

Mark 12:28-34

In our Gospel text for today, we hear about an encounter between a scribe and Jesus.

Throughout Mark’s Gospel, we’ve seen a combative attitude toward Jesus from many of the people described as being a part of the Jewish leadership.

But not here.

There’s no adversarial tone to the conversation between Jesus and the scribe. It’s just 2 people who love and treasure the Word of God talking together about it.

Hold onto that thought for a moment, because I’m going to come back to it. But first, I want to look more closely at their conversation.

The scribe asks Jesus which is the most important of the 613 laws of Jewish tradition.

For his answer, Jesus turns to Deuteronomy 6 – love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and being. These are words as familiar to faithful Jews as the Lord’s Prayer is to us.

But Jesus goes further, adding from Leviticus 19 – love your neighbor as yourself.

There is no commandment greater than these, Jesus says.

And the scribe agrees.

Because love is built into the law that God gave Moses. Love is at the core of the Law. You could even say that love is the heart of the Law.

Like the prophets, Jesus insists that devotion to God goes hand-in-hand with right relationships among people. Basically, you can’t have a relationship with God without sharing God’s concern for the well-being of your neighbor.

Genesis tells us that each of us is created in the image of God. Which means each of us bears the image of God.  
 Which can be hard to remember whenever we are feeling the effects of our imperfections. And can be hard to remember when we encounter other people and feel the effects of *their* imperfections.

And it can be a challenge to find the image of God in people we don’t like, people we struggle to find common ground with.

But this would be an awfully boring world if we were all alike.

We bear the image of God, but we are *not* God. Our image is incomplete. Without incorporating the image of God that exists in others — regardless of whether we like them, regardless of whether they believe what we do, act like we do, worship like we do — we have an incomplete image of God.

On this Reformation Day, when we honor the efforts of reformers throughout the ages, it’s worth taking a moment to remember that we don’t have all the right answers. None of us do. No denomination does. No system or set of doctrines holds a fully complete understanding of God.

Even when we’re all put together, like an endless jigsaw puzzle, we still don’t have the full picture of God, because we are imperfect beings.

But together, we come closer than we do apart.

If we’re going to get together, though, we have to learn to move past our differences. Or, at the very least, not let our differences keep us from listening to each other.

Which brings me back to the bit about the animosity between the Jewish leadership and Jesus.

We have a tendency to lump all of the Jewish leadership together, as if they shared a mind. The chief priests, the Pharisees and Sadducees, they get lumped together as if they were the opposing team. As if they’re comic book villains, playing with their mustaches and spending all their time plotting how to trip up Jesus.

There’s an inherent danger in lumping people together like this. And that danger is that we reduce complex people of faith to an idea that’s overly simplistic and utterly unrealistic. Which allows us to be dismissive of them, even contemptful of them.

But the chief priests and scribes, the Pharisees and Sadducees, they were people who were trying to figure out what it means to be faithful people of God. What it meant to be the Chosen People in a land occupied by a foreign empire. Did they get it right all the time?

No. But neither do I, and neither do any of you. And neither has *anybody ever*, no matter how hard they tried. Except for Jesus. And he had the benefit of being…well, the Son of God.

As a society, we seem to have forgotten how to listen to people who differ from us. We seem to have forgotten how to disagree with people peaceably. We seem to have become very comfortable with letting malice and disdain into our hearts. And we seem to forget that when two people differ, the truth usually lies somewhere between them.

The pandemic has made this even worse. We’re all cranky and tired and short on both patience and forgiveness.

But when we choose to not engage in meaningful, respectful conversation with people with whom we have disagreements… when we choose to listen only to opinions that validate our own… when we pigeon hole people into categories that determine their value or worthiness to us…it’s easy to forget that the people we are lumping into a stereotype, dismissive of, contemptful toward…all bear the image of God.

And it becomes easier and easier to drift farther and farther away from the greatest commandments.

Tish Harrison Warren, an Anglican priest, writes, “Each of us is more than the sum of our political and religious beliefs. We each have complex relationships with the people we love. We each have bodies that get sick, that enjoy good tacos or the turning of fall. We like certain movies or music. We laugh at how babies sound when they sneeze. We hurt when we skin a knee. The way we form humanizing, nonthreatening interactions around these things taps into something real about us. We are three-dimensional people who are textured, interesting, ordinary and lovely.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

Saved by grace through faith, we are complex people living in a crazy world. People who are called to love our neighbor in our imperfect ways, confident in the promise that we are forgiven, and that we are made right with God not by anything we do, but because of what God has done for us.

Freed from the fear of being separated from God’s love, we are freed to love extravagantly, forgive others as freely as we are forgiven by God, and grow inside of ourselves hearts that are inclined toward love. For “salvation is not a reward for the righteous, but a gift for the guilty.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Let us pray: Gracious God, you give us the gifts of faith and forgiveness. Create in us hearts inclined toward love, that we may better learn to love our neighbors and ourselves the way that you love us. Through your great love, heal the woundedness of our hearts. Amen.

1. “We Need to Talk About the Weather” *The New York Times,* October 24, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Tweet by Steven Lawson, December 2, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)