

Psalm 19:7-14  
Mark 12:28-34

25th Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
November 11, 2018

## Theology 101

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

The first six verses of Psalm 19 focus on creation, the creation which declares God's glory, silently but eloquently. In the remaining verses, which provide our Psalm reading for today, we hear praise of God instruction and its life-giving quality for us. Listen to these words from Psalm 19:7-14...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson today we hear one of the scribes, or legal experts, ask Jesus a question about which is the most important of all. Jesus expands on the sacred text of Deuteronomy 6 where we find the Shema, verses which have played a central role in Jewish and Christian traditions. Let's listen in on the discussion as we hear Mark 12:28-34...

### *Sermon*

With its teaching about love of God and neighbor, our passage from Mark expresses the very essence of Christianity. In the life of the church here at Midway, as well as in our own personal lives, we might ask if our *words* and *actions* reflect and embody the love of God and neighbor. As we interpret scripture, we might ask whether our *interpretation* leads us to love God and our fellow man. Saint Augustine once wrote:

Whoever therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all. (*On Christian Doctrine*)

And one of the Scribes, coming forward and hearing the debate with the Saducees, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, asked him,

What is the first of all the commandments?

Therein a theological discussion ensues, one that deals with the very foundations of faith and life. I can picture a seminary class with Jesus the teacher, being asked a question by a second-career student who has been impressed with Jesus' answers to other questions. We might call it "Theology 1010."

And Jesus answered:

"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."

Perhaps this learned scribe shares Jesus' anguish over a temple worship that has lost its soul and purpose, its moral authority, its heart for renewal. No longer does it hear, discern, or respond to the divine voice. It is a place where Jesus overturns the tables of money changers. A place to be cleansed.

Is it not written,  
 "My house shall be called a house of  
 prayer for all the nations"?  
 But you have made it  
 a den of robbers. (Mark 11:17)

The Judeo-Christian faith calls us to love God. Here in Mark Jesus refers to Deuteronomy 6:5, which was part of the Shema, the foundational creed of Judaism, the sentence with which every Jewish service opens, and the first text a Jewish child commits to memory:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,  
 and with all your might.

And secondly,

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Well, let us consider this word love. What are we trying to convey when we use it this morning? The word as it is used in the New Testament was practically unknown to the world in which it came. “It has been called the great discovery of Christianity.” If we could cipher Christianity down to one word, that word could well be love. Paul said if I don’t have love, I’m nothing.

In the New Testament there are several Greek words for love: there is eros which refers basically to romance or passion; philia—denoting good will for our neighbor as in Philadelphia—the city of brotherly love; epithumia—referring to desire, especially in reference to forbidden things and sometimes rendered lust. And there is a fourth Greek word—agapé—which the New Testament uses to express the heart of its message. It puts it at the center of everything that concerns God’s relation to humans, and our relations to one another. It is this word which Paul uses again and again in 1 Corinthians 13:

Love [agapé] is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (4-7)

In Galatians the apostle describes agapé as one of the fruits of the spirit and again in Corinthians as the greatest of the theological virtues—even greater than faith and hope.

And what is meant by this agapé love? Well, it involves more than personal warmth or affection. It involves our will as well as our emotion. It involves extending ourselves to nurture the well-being of someone else. It leads us to action—action which doesn’t stop with our immediate family but goes beyond to all classes, races, and even enemies.

God is love and it is his nature to love. God loves us as though there were only one of us. This love is epitomized in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only

begotten Son.” God’s love not only involved his affection for us but also his will and thus his action. God acted out of his love—he sent his Son Jesus to live and die and rise again to redeem us. And it is important to remember that in our Christian tradition divine love precedes human love:

We love him because he first loved us. (1 John 4:29)

This commandment that Jesus says is first calls us to love God with our entire being—heart, soul, mind, and strength. In short, to love God with our whole being is the first

And here in Mark 12, with barely a pause Jesus says there’s a second commandment that is like the first:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Love of self is assumed; Jesus calls us to act toward others with the same degree of goodwill that we should naturally accord to ourselves. This comes from Leviticus 19:18:

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people,  
but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

We love our neighbor by praying in the power of God’s Spirit and working for God’s will to be done on earth, as it is done in heaven, to be done in the life of our neighbor as it is done in our own. By extending ourselves through decisions and actions. In 1 Thessalonians Paul continues his recollection of the relationship between himself and the members of the church in Thessalonica. He was not content with proclaiming the gospel in an abstract way, as if only concerned about some philosophical truth about God. But Paul and his co-workers acted out of their love of God and others. They behaved toward the Thessalonians as would a loving mother caring for her own children.

Dr. Morris Wee, who was Senior Pastor at Central Lutheran Church in downtown Minneapolis, once proclaimed in a sermon that in order to be faithful to the high calling of ordained ministry, pastors need to be willing and able to do five things:

- 1) Love the Lord God
- 2) Love all people
- 3) Maintain good health
- 4) Read a book, and
- 5) Have and maintain a healthy sense of humor

Not a bad list of criteria for a pastor, or a member of the congregation for that matter. Note that love of God and neighbor top the list. For the command to love God and others represents the very heart of the law of God—“Theology 101.”

There was a young woman whose husband deserted her, leaving her to raise their four children single-handedly. Sadly, she next learned that she had cancer. And for her this revelation was the final straw. She became very depressed, and subsequently, she signed herself into a hospital and determined that she would die. Refusing food, she went from one-hundred-forty pounds to ninety-seven. Her life had become unbearable and she believed that no one really cared about her. She had given up. And there she lay in a hospital bed dying and without the will to live.

But a nurse's aide who worked the midnight shift noticed this woman. And late at night when the hospital became quiet and the room lights were turned off and most patients were asleep, this aide would quietly slip into the young mother's room, sit at her bedside, talk to her, read a few familiar passages of scripture, pray, and quietly hum a familiar hymn. And as she did this, the woman who had given up slowly began to regain her desire to live. Day by day she

improved. And eventually, she left the hospital to return to life and to being a mother to her four children. A nurse's aide—not a minister, a doctor, or a teacher. But she ministered, she healed, she taught—through love.

Donna Schaper in her sermon “When Love Is the Only Answer” tells the story of some boys in the eighth grade who out of love shaved their heads because one of their classmates had undergone chemotherapy and had lost his hair. It was an intentional loving gesture made in the hope that their friend would not feel peculiar, differ from everyone else.

Love of God and love of neighbor take us to the heart of the law. Love of God and neighbor are the keys to life in the kingdom of God. They are the linchpins of all the law and the prophets. They are greater than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. For God wants mercy rather than sacrifice and knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

Let's make sure that Jesus' answer to the scribe's question is central to the life of this congregation, and to our personal lives as well. That way we will be a vital church, and the people God calls us to be in Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.