

Mark 12:28-34 (NRSV)

The First Commandment

(Mt 22.34—40; Lk 10.25—28)

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.

It's Not Rocket Science

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Mark 12:28-34*

The great and theologian Karl Barth, whose work many find ponderous, was once asked to summarize his theology in more simple terms. Barth quipped, "Jesus loves me, this I know, 'cause the Bible tells me so." Not a bad answer. But he might have done just as well with the one Jesus gave in today's scripture lesson: '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.' And then, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

That's it. We can pack up our belongings. We can close the doors of the church. We can go home. There's nothing else to it. Love the one God, and love your neighbor. Go out and do it. It's not rocket science.

Well, it's not rocket science, but there is some evidence that it may be easier to rocket to the moon than it is to actually live on earth by the simple teaching that Jesus has given us. And why is that? Why do we have such trouble following the simple teachings of Jesus? On second thought, maybe we'd better not shut the church up just yet. We may have a little more work to do.

As I prepared this morning's sermon, I was struck by these very same questions I have just posed. Jesus' words are so clear. Few of us would argue with them. And yet how hard they are to do.

Recently, in a town outside of Boston, several teenage friends were spending the afternoon together. They were all members of the same football team. They had been buddies for years. They lived in the same neighborhood. They went to the same schools. Through the many tailgate barbecues and even more fund-raisers for the team, their families had become friendly as well. On this particular day, the friends were out laughing and having a good time, as they usually did. They went to the mall and met a few of their girlfriends. They strutted around like peacocks, doing a little hip-hop and saying they were "gangstas," which was about as far from the truth as you can imagine. The boys left the mall and were headed to football practice. They were laughing and telling jokes with one another, and as teenagers sometimes do, they were driving too fast. In a flash, the laughter and jokes were replaced by the sound of screeching tires and frightened shouts. The car skidded from the road and slammed sideways into a pole and a tree. Two of the boys died in the accident.

As you may imagine there was heartbreak in the community. Friends and families were overcome by grief. The suddenness with which laughter and friendship could be extinguished by death and loss was almost incomprehensible.

Within a few days, though, something else began to happen. Grief gave way to anger. The boy who was driving was only slightly injured. The parents of the boys who died were outraged. This boy had killed their sons, they said. He walked away while their innocent children paid with their lives. Why was he still free? He should be in jail for vehicle homicide.

There should be justice. He should pay for what he did.

Meanwhile, of course, the family of the boy who was driving had their own hands full. Their son was grieving the loss of his friends, and he was blaming himself for their deaths. His parents were also shaken by the death of these boys who had often been in their house, and they were also concerned for their son. They were speechless in the face of the virulent attacks on their son by their neighbors. They became defensive and protective.

Soon the neighborhood which had for years been marked by friendship became instead an enclave of hatred and blame. Torn apart first by the terrible accident, the community could find its way to heal, and instead its wounds were enlarged and salted until they became an incurable cancer.

Compare that story with the one that recently came out of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Charles Roberts, a troubled local man, walked into a local Amish school. His intention was to sexually assault and murder ten young girls ranging from 13 to 7 years old. As he had planned, Roberts shot the ten young school girls, five of whom died on the spot. Unlike the car accident, this was a premeditated and brutal attack on innocent children. Another tale of heartbreak, this one had every ingredient in a recipe to create rage and vengeance. But no less stunning than the news of the murders were the other news reports that began to follow the shooting. The Amish community in and around Nickel Mines, including the families of the girls who were shot, called out for forgiveness Roberts and prayers for the his family. Next we heard that many of the Amish attended Roberts funeral, enacting by their deeds their words of forgiveness. Next we heard that the Amish community was taking up a collection not only for the victim's families, but also for Roberts widow and children, the family of the man who had murdered their daughters.

One imagines that the terror and heartbreak in Nickel Mines will take a long time to heal. I cannot imagine the grief I would feel were one of my children murdered. Nonetheless, it is strikingly obvious that the Amish community's response has powerfully inaugurated the process of healing. Forgiveness and love in the face of an horrific offense in Nickel Mines so clearly has had the opposite effect to that the cry for vengeance and hatred has had in the community outside of Boston whose children were killed in an awful accident. It is painfully obvious that in Nickel Mines both the aggrieved and the family and friends of the murderer have already found more peace than those in the Boston situation may ever find.

I chose these stories to talk about Jesus' admonition to love our neighbor in part because they are so stunning. They have incredible emotional content. And though we can see the better response that the Amish made, many of us I suspect, at least speaking for myself, can see ourselves striking out against the person responsible for our child's death. Many of us may feel that we couldn't help ourselves. Perhaps most of us cannot imagine acting as the Amish community in Nickel Mines did.

Jesus told us to love our neighbor, but in truth, there are times when it is incredibly hard to do. And the question is, where does that leave us? Should we just admit that we're lousy Christians and quit trying? Or maybe we say that Jesus gives us nice ideals but we can't really live by them. There are a lot of things that we can say I suppose, but through all of them we are trying to grapple with just how hard it is to always love our neighbors. It may not be rocket science, but it sure is easier to understand it than do it.

But let's, just for argument's sake, just hypothetically, let's just for a moment assume

that Jesus actually meant for us to do what he said. How in the world do we get there? How do we become more like the folks in Nickel Mines? That's where the first part of what Jesus tells the scribe comes in. Before the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves comes, 'The Lord your God 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.' Now, I have to confess that it's not immediately obvious how this solves the problem. It may not be any easier to will a vibrant love for God than for our neighbor. God's pretty abstract, after all. What does loving God actually even mean, we might ask?

That's a fair enough question. And I'm pretty sure that none of us can just sit down and say, okay, today I'm going to love God and that will solve all my problems. You see, I think you have to get in there and get your hands dirty with God. You've got to have some experience of God. You've got to talk with God, maybe even some days yell at God. Loving God's like loving anyone else; you don't do it as an abstract idea; you do it out of a relationship.

Now I can hear you. I can hear you saying, Lord, pastor, your going from bad to worse. It's hard enough for me to love my neighbor, but at least I know what you're talking about. But how do you have a relationship with something you can't see or touch or heck, let's be honest, how can you have a relationship with something that on most days you're not even sure exists?

And now we're getting somewhere. Because that's just exactly the right question. And it's why I wasn't too worried when I said in the beginning that this stuff Jesus tells us isn't rocket science and we just need to go out and do it, and so we can close up the church. I wasn't too worried because none of us can just go out and do it. And more than that, if we ever have any hope of ever going out and doing it, we're going to need the church, and we're going to need each other. I'm not saying the church automatically helps us. There are plenty examples of where the church throughout history gets it as wrong as anybody. But what I'm talking about, what I'm after here this morning is that we need a place where we tell each other the stories of our faith. In those stories we begin to meet the living God. We need a place where we can talk about the just emerging buds of that conversation with God. We need a place where the hymns and the stories, the scripture and the prayers of the community become a part of us and shape the ways we understand ourselves. We need a place and a community to water and nourish that deep yearning for the holy we all have, and to cultivate the glimpses that we catch from time to time of what Rudolph Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*.

The Amish community of Nickel Mines wasn't able to what it did just by saying they would believe and act in a certain way. They were able to do what they did because of the people they had become, because of their longstanding relationship with God. For them God was one thing and only one thing. They didn't confuse God with nationalism, or vengeance, or wealth, or bigotry, or social standing, or even family loyalty. They knew those things to be idols when they are mistaken for God. They knew God was one, and through their experience of God in their religious community they had come to love God, to fall in love with God, really. And they found that when you fall in love with God, it becomes awfully hard not to also fall in love with what God has created, including our neighbors.

So that is what we are about in this place, and this may actually be a little more like rocket science. We are on an adventure, a journey, a love affair with God. May this church community be a place, free from idolatry, that supports you in the adventure of your life. Climb

into the rocket and head for the moon. Amen.