

Reflection

November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2024

Mark 12: 28-34

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Title: A Trinity of Love

Prayer: Holy One, guide us by your Word and Spirit; keep our eyes open to all you will show us, then give us the courage to use what we learn for the work to be done now. Amen.

When I was studying to serve the church I had the opportunity to work with someone who really rubbed me the wrong way, really got under my skin. In the past I would have just avoided that person ... put as little energy as possible into them. But, I was learning about all this 'love your neighbour' stuff and had to figure out how to love people that I might not like.

So I developed a little blessing that I repeated whenever I had to work with this person or even walk past them. As they got closer and closer, I'd take a deep breath and inside my head I'd say, "God bless you jerk face."

That was my quiet little mantra whenever our paths crossed.

It seems a little juvenile now, but in the end it proved a very effective learning tool because it helped me understand that I was as much a barrier to our relationship as that person was.

And as time went on I was able to genuinely see that God loved them just as much as God loved me; and that if I was going to see them as a child of God, I would have to change how I looked at them.

That little blessing – tongue in cheek as it was – really helped me get on with seeing my neighbours – even the challenging ones – as children of God. Loving my neighbour as myself – a child of God.

I can still get annoyed and agitated and swear and cross my arms and hold a grudge; but I also know it's my work to move through that, my work to let go of my judgments and grudges until I can see the other as my sibling in Christ.

And that might be the key ... we are not being asked to be more than human; but we are being asked to move in a direction that gets us "not far from the kingdom of God."

Ruminating on this passage got me thinking in threes – a trinity of sorts. We are being asked to exercise three loves here: Love our God; Love our Neighbour and Love ourselves. They are three distinct loves and yet they are all connected. One love cannot fully bloom without attention paid to the other two. They work together, cannot be separated and yet are individual as well.

For example, we can't love God in isolation. We can't sit in the quiet of our own home loving God and then go outside and start fights or steal from people. Because ... we are starting fights and stealing from God when we do that. They are connected.

This scripture can be found in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but only in Mark does Jesus say "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

This comes from Deuteronomy – the book where Moses and the Israelite journey are featured. One of the main lessons in Deuteronomy is that we have choice. Every day we have the free will to choose life; to choose life on the path that follows God's command – love the lord your God with all your heart, soul and might.

This part of Deuteronomy (6: 4-9) that Jesus is quoting goes into more detail about this one command. It says:

- **Keep** these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.
- **Recite** them to your children and **talk** about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.
- **Bind** them as a sign on your hand, **fix** them as an emblem on your forehead.
- **Write** them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

When Jesus says “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” he is recalling this entire passage – keep these words, recite them, bind them to you, write them on your doorframe.

Almost like we need a constant reminder to love God with all of who we are, right?

So ... loving our neighbour. Loving them when we don't like them, don't agree with them, are hurt by them, scared of them. How do we do that?

This piece of Jesus' instruction comes from Leviticus (19:18): “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people; but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Some suggest that not everyone is our neighbour, so we determine who our neighbours are and then focus our love there.

The Leviticus passage speaks to care for the poor and protection for the weak.

But, through all the stories we learn about Jesus, we know his idea of neighbour is expanded. He invites everyone to the table – tax collector, friend, outcast, poor, leader, follower.

Love your neighbour becomes all of God's beloved.

The one who agrees with us and the one who doesn't. The one who tries to persecute us and the one who raises us up. The one who talks behind our back and the one who defends us. The one who stole from us and the one who is overly generous. The one who speaks hatred and the one who offers love.

They are all our neighbour.

We are called to Love our neighbour.

The full phrase is “love your neighbour as yourself.” Earlier I suggested this might mean that we see our neighbour as a child of God because we are a child of God. But I think there is more to it. And, I think it's challenging.

Love our neighbour as ourselves.

Another way I read this is that I can only love my neighbour as deeply or fairly or openly as I love myself.

I wonder if the “giving and receiving” paradigm might help us understand the love neighbour as self concept a bit more. We often say ... and see if this rings true for you ... “oh, it’s much easier to give than receive. I really like giving, it makes me feel good. But, receiving makes me uncomfortable.”

Sound familiar?

So, if we are to love our neighbour as ourselves then our giving is only as open and free as our ability to receive. There’s a vulnerability here, a door that needs to open. A permission for others to see us – really see us. When we can fully receive with full humility and grace, acceptance and openness – only then can we fully give.

If we judge ourselves harshly or have ticker tapes in our mind that say things like “no one likes me” or “that was a stupid thing I did” or “I’ll never get this right” how is that loving ourselves?

If that’s how we love ourselves, then this commandment reminds us that that’s how we love our neighbours – with judgment, criticism, disapproval.

How we love ourselves is how we love our neighbour.

Love your neighbour as yourself.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that this passage shows up today.

- We’ve just come through a nail-biting BC election;
- we are moments away from the US election that will have impacts around the world regardless of the result.
- We have grown used to hateful rhetoric.
- We seem to have lost the ability to hold differing opinions and still be civil.
- The possibility of learning from each other seems to be replaced with fighting each other.
- There is a right side and a wrong side and we are in a continual pattern of competition.

How does this Trinity of love fit into all of that?

We are weighted down and we are breaking under the pressure.

Life can seem like a fight some days. We want to close our door and shut it all out.

And, yet, in the eye of this current storm we are being asked to Love the Lord our God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds and with all our strength – 100% - and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

It's a tall order, and maybe all we can do is take one tiny step at a time.

That cheeky mantra of mine ... "God bless you jerk face" was a very tiny step. But it reaped big rewards as it changed my perspective. That person and I never became friends, the hostility coming at me remained pretty high; but I got to a point where I held genuine love in my heart for that person ... because loving that person was also how I was also loving God, and loving myself.

At the very end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7) Jesus says this to those listening:

<sup>24</sup>"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. <sup>25</sup>The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. <sup>26</sup>And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup>The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!"

We are being asked to act on Jesus' words; not necessarily understand how it's all going to work out in the end, but to believe what he says as possible and then go do it.

Jesus says the greatest – the GREATEST – commandment is to 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 love your neighbour as yourself."

It doesn't say we have to agree or be best friends – it says we have to love.

This is our command.

Amen.