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"The Rule of Love"



Mark 12:28-34

²⁸One 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?" ²⁹Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you 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.'³¹The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³²Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³and '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." ³⁴When 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.

There's a scene in the 2016 film "Risen," starring Joseph Fiennes that I need to tell you about. The movie is about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as seen through the eyes of a Roman centurion who travels with the disciples in the weeks following Easter. In the scene, Jesus and the disciples come to a small town on a lakeshore and our eyes are drawn to a man in the distance who is being

beaten by the townspeople. He is mercilessly taunted and hit with fists and rocks and being forced out of town.

As the camera comes closer it becomes clear that this poor man is afflicted by leprosy. At that time leprosy was an incurable, contagious disease that caused the loss of appendages. It was horribly disfiguring. More than that, it also made those afflicted unclean, both religiously and socially. They were outcasts. Untouchable. Unapproachable. Literal pariahs to any and all.

But what made the scene so memorable was Jesus' reaction to the man. Instead of keeping his distance, Jesus walks towards the man. The man sees him coming and tries to shoo him away, revealing his disease as a warning. But Jesus insists on approaching. He gets down on his knees next to the man and embraces him. At first the man is resistant, then he lets himself be embraced. And after a few moments, when Jesus lets go of him, we see that he is healed.

I shared this story this morning because in Jesus' time, the teachings of the Torah were clear – lepers were untouchable. And to touch them was to make yourself religiously defiled. It was a severe violation of the religious law. It was unsafe, dangerous. And yet Jesus didn't hesitate to heal the leper. And we know of plenty of other stories in the Gospels where Jesus did more than just heal and touch lepers in violation of the Torah. He was touched by and interacted with the woman who had uncontrolled bleeding. He ate dinner with the tax collectors and in the homes of the Gentiles. He healed on the Sabbath, and more.

Why did Jesus, a devout Jewish Rabbi, do all of these things in violation of the religious law of his day? Because of today's passage. Because Jesus understood that some teachings stood above others. Because Jesus knew that the greatest commandments of the Torah were, "'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you 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.' ³¹The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

This introduces an important concept for us that is modeled in Jesus' life and teachings, it's called the, "Law of Love." Renowned theologian Frederick Buechner described the Law of Love this way in his book "Beyond Words,"

Jesus said that the one supreme law is that we are to love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls, and our neighbors as ourselves. "On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets" is the way he put it (Matthew 22:40), meaning that all lesser laws are to be judged on the basis of that supreme one. In any given situation, the lesser law is to be obeyed if it is consistent with the law of love and superseded if it isn't.¹

So when Jesus finds conflict between the law's injunctions to keep his distance and not touch the leper, and whether or not he should heal the leper, and touch the leper, his choice is clear. He has to heal the leper, rather than preserve his own cleanliness. He follows the rule of love and sets the lesser law aside.²

A little historical aside here to help put this into context for us. In olden days there was no consensus of exactly how long a foot – the unit of measurement – really was. You might travel from kingdom to kingdom or even town to town, and find people referring to differing distances as a foot. Some using a foot that was a bit longer, some using a foot that was a bit shorter. A French Abby constructed in two episodes, used a foot that was about 30 centimeters long in the 9th century, and a foot that was about 34 centimeters long in the 10th.³ A 16th century book on geometry used this method to derive how long a foot was to be:



Stand at the door of a church on a Sunday and bid 16 men to stop, tall ones and small ones, as they happen to pass out when the service is finished; then make them put their left feet one behind the other, and the length thus obtained shall be a right and lawful rood to measure and survey the land with, and the 16th part of it shall be the right and lawful foot.⁴

¹ <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2018/1/22/weekly-sermon-illustration-law-of-love>. Accessed Nov 2, 2018.

² Ibid.

³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot_\(unit\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot_(unit)). Accessed Nov 2, 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

You can see the problem here. Without any standard of agreement for how long a foot was, there were real and persistent problems. That's why later rulers, as countries centralized and gained power, created systems of weights and measures arbitrated by the crown to establish norms for all of these things. These norms would be kept in a central location and copies made and sent out to all corners of the kingdom for merchants and builders to work from to create their own weights and measures. The king possessed, if you will, the "norming norm," for the weight or measure, by which all others were to be based off.

So, what does this have to do with the Bible passage for today? Well what we have here, is Jesus giving us the "norming norm," for the life of faith. He is giving us the greater teaching by which all other teachings of the faith are to be measured: Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. In all questions and instances of Bible teachings, where two principles seem to come into conflict, it is this greater principle, this "norming norm," of the "rule of love," that we love God and love neighbor that always takes precedence.

Imagine a world and a life that was patterned after this simple rule: where everyone had this simple dictum as their guiding compass point, to love God and to love one's neighbor as one's self. Indeed this isn't a new experiment. Ancient church theologian Augustine attempted to establish a Christian monastic community ordered around what he called "The Rule." This rule was to contain all that was needed to model what it might look like for Christians to enact perfect, harmonious, community here on earth. And at the heart of it, it one simple instruction, "living in harmony, 'being of one mind and heart on the way to God. The most fundamental message of the Rule is this: Love -- love of God, love of neighbour -- is the centre of Christian life.'"⁵

The Reformation church fleshed this idea out a bit more in the intervening centuries, such that the rule of love was expanded to the life and teachings of Jesus. In other words, when in conflict and seeking to understand the Bible's teachings or what God would have us do in a certain situation, we are always to look to the rule of love, and what did Jesus say on the matter, or do on the matter. These would be are guiding principles. This idea of Jesus becoming the "norming norm," for our behavior and treatment of others became popularized a

⁵<https://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/mission/campusministry/RegularSpiritualPractices/resources/spirituality/about/rule.html>. Accessed Nov 2, 2018.

short decade ago with the popular wristband wearing movement emblazoned with the acronym, “WWJD.” Or, “What Would Jesus Do.” For instance it was this simple Rule of Love – this question of WWJD? That led the church to reject the ancient institution of slavery. Slavery appears throughout the Bible as a reflection of the cultural milieu of its writing. But as Christians matured through the centuries they chose to reject the notion of slavery based on this simple question, “Is it in accord with the Rule of Love?” And it was found wanting, and rejected.

So for contemporary Christians we need to engage in this same exercise that our predecessors used to reject slavery. We are called to look around us at the brokenness in the world, and practice a little empathy and engage our imaginations, and apply the rule of love.

For instance, imagine for a minute that you’re the leper in the bible story. You’re outcast, beaten, shunned, and ignored. When people see you, they run from you. You can’t work. You can’t live in a normal house or neighborhood. You’re probably starved, cold, and sick. What would you have people do for you? What would you have people know about you? How would you have people react towards you? What would loving God and loving you look like?

Now perform that same exercise with some of these circumstances: Say you were a black person living in Alabama in the year 1955. What would your life be like? What would you be wishing people knew about you? How would you be wishing others would treat you? Now imagine you’re a Somali immigrant whose family was brutally tortured and killed before your eyes as a young child, and you came here with nothing, not knowing the language, possessing only the clothes on your back. What would your life be like? What would you be wishing people knew about you? How would you be wishing others would treat you? Or imagine you were someone who were female, or gay, or Jewish, or a migrant worker, or a homeless person?

One look at the headline tells us that we have our work cut out for us here.

This is a high calling isn’t it? This rule of love? And it isn’t a political challenge either. This calling from Jesus stands independent of any political platform. The idea of Loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself preceded any of our fallen institutions. But it is a lifelong challenge. It pushes us to respect

the inherent worth and dignity of each and every human being. It will stretch our resources. It will stretch our understandings of what we are capable of accomplishing. It will push us to expand our sense of justice and work for the betterment of all humankind.

And when you stop to think about it, would you really want to follow a God who asked for anything less? The commandments of Jesus ought to stretch us, they ought to ask us to love more, care more, and do more justice, strive for mercy, and walk humbly with God. After all, we're following the one who showed us what that looked like? Aren't we? The question that hangs in the air, though, is this: are we willing to follow him? Do we have what it takes to live the rule of love each day? May it be so.

Alleluia and Amen.