

Mark 12: 28-34 NRSV - The First Commandment (You may follow along in the Pew Bible on page 49)

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."

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Please join me in prayer:

Holy One, we are distracted by so many things that far too often, you are the first we neglect. Silence the noise. Refocus our sight. Fine tune our hearing. Calm our hearts that we may turn to you with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Good Morning! It is wonderful to see you all! For those of you who do not know me, my name is Martha Lannon Higgins. I have been a member at Guilford Park since I was 6 years old when my father answered the call to be pastor here. So, I am a preacher's kid who grew up in this church and forgot to leave.

It is good to be here with you. I look out and see people who have been and continue to be important in my spiritual journey. I look out and see family – my family of birth, my husband, my family by marriage, my brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of you have watched me grow up or grew up with me. You are the ones that helped shape my formative years – teachers for Sunday school and Communicants class, youth group advisors, and adults that loved me. I have personal connections with so many of you through circle, committees, the YES choir, various bible studies, Companions in Christ, liturgical arts ministry, Montreat retreats and Pilgrimage. I look out and see our pastors who lead us in our work as a church family. I see our parish associates and music leaders. I see children who are being raised in a faithful place. I see new faces, faces that I do not know as well, yet still feel connected to. I feel the cloud of witnesses, the presence of those who have gone before. You are my history and we continue to walk together on this spiritual journey. To each of you, I am grateful.

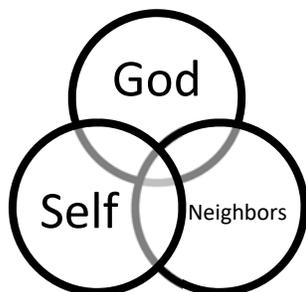
I will start with a confession. When I was first asked to preach for Laity Sunday, I thought I had a good idea of what I wanted to say. I had been thinking about some things that I thought would make a good message. I picked this scripture because it was appropriate for the theme of what I wanted to say. I tried to write what I wanted to say several times, to no avail. You will notice in these previous statements it was all about me. What "I" wanted to say. Well, as is usually the case, God finds a way to gently direct me even when I do not feel I need direction. So I gave up and did what I should have done to start with. I asked God for guidance. What message did God have waiting for me in this passage? This sermon is the result of weeks of living with and meditating on this passage. Needless to say, it is very different from where it started.

As you can tell from our scriptures, we will be talking about love. Not the love of a favorite food, or a favorite activity or even of a sports team. Today we are talking about the love that is described in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. This chapter is familiar, the language is beautiful. It is comforting. Yet, this passage also holds mystery and challenge. The love described is the love for people, the love in relationships. This is the love that we can share with others, because God first loved us. It lays out an ideal image of what it means to truly love as shown through the life of Christ. This love is preeminent. Without love, nothing else matters. Love permeates throughout all time and space. The description of love as kindness,

gentleness, forbearance, and patience apply to all of our relationships. Love is all about relationships because this is where we experience it. It informs us of what love means in the Mark passage. I was taught from a young age that God is love. This has become the very core of my understanding of who God is.

Which brings us to our main passage for the day. In response to the question of what is the greatest commandment, 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."

This Mark passage is about relationships: between God, self and others and how these relationships interact and inform each other. I am a visual person. I "see" things in my mind's eye to help me understand the world. I began to see these relationships in a series of overlapping circles. I have included it in the bulletin for you.



Technically, this is called a Venn diagram and is used to describe the common and unique attributes of different data sets. So, let me walk you through it. Each circle is labeled – God, self and neighbors (or others, if you prefer). To be clear, while one of the circles is labeled God, I do not mean in any way that God is contained in that circle. That circle represents ***our understanding*** of God. If you wish, you can label the background God as well, to represent that God is far greater than what we can understand and that God’s presence encompasses and holds us all.

You will notice that there are overlaps between each two circles and in the middle, all three overlap. These places of overlap represent the aspects that the circles have in common. Let’s look at all of these overlaps.

There is an overlap between God and self. This is where the love you have for God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength resides. But, what does it *mean* to love God with all your heart, and soul and mind and strength?

Just as our physical heart pumps the life blood through our bodies, our spiritual heart pumps the divine life force through our soul. In the spiritual sense, our heart refers to our center of being where we make decisions. In biblical reference, the heart refers to the thinking part of the soul. In our culture, the heart is the “location” of love within our bodies.

Soul is our essence. It is the child of God that we are created to be. It is the part of us that is ever seeking God, and the part that feels empty and incomplete when we feel distant from God.

Our mind is where we interact with the world in an intellectual sense. To love God with your all your mind is to remain curious, explore, ask questions, seek answers, grow and expand.

Last is to love God with all your strength. This means putting God first, above all else.

So, loving God with all our heart, and soul, and mind and strength means to give our whole life and being to God. This ***is a conscious choice to be in relationship with God***. As with any relationship, it takes time, attention, nurture, and focus. It is a lifelong process and experience. The relationship will change and evolve, it will have its ups and downs, at times we may feel distant from God; but, ***always, always***, we are held firmly in the grasp of God's love.

The relationship with God is primary. It is first above all else. We freely offer all we are back to our Creator.

I label this overlap between God and self "spiritual practices" because I experience and express my love for God through my practices – meditation, prayer, worship, praise, spiritual music, play, creative expression. To be in relationship with our Creator is the most natural thing in the world. But it does take discipline. This is why spiritual practices are often referred to as spiritual disciplines. It takes *daily* practice. As we practice, we bring God into our awareness more and more until eventually ***our lives become*** the spiritual practice.

In the book, The Practice of the Presence of God, Brother Lawrence, a 17th century lay brother in the Carmelite monastery in Paris, describes how to give all that you do to God. In it, letters and conversions between Brother Lawrence and an Abbott outline this simple yet difficult practice. When he joined the monastery, he was given charge of the kitchen, a job that he grudgingly accepted as penance for prior sinful living. Over time, he decided to concentrate on the simple idea of loving God in everything that he did. This practice of doing everything for the love of God transformed his resentment at a menial job into a moment by moment sense of joy. How would your life change, if, in every moment, you were focused on God? If, in every moment, you chose to do the task at hand for God?

The overlap between self and neighbors, I label "ordinary dailiness". This is where we live. We are constantly interacting with others. Some we like, some we don't, some we know and some are strangers. We may go through our days on autopilot without much thought. We just keep on keeping on. This is the daily grind.

Within the second part of the commandment, we are asked to love ourselves. The way we interact with others is directly related to how we see ourselves. Do you treat yourself with love? Is your self-talk kind? Are you patient with yourself? Do you take care of yourself – physically, emotionally and spiritually?

It is common for self-care to be seen as selfish or self-absorbed, and it can get that way. However, it is also true that we cannot give of ourselves from emptiness. In this sense, self-care is important. How do you love and care for yourself?

We cannot fully experience God's unconditional love until we believe that we are worthy of it. Our worthiness has nothing to do with our behavior and everything to do with who God is. This is grace. Even on your worst days, God loves you. To your very core. Because God created you. God intends for us to claim and embrace our own status as a beloved child of God. It is only in accepted God's amazing grace that we can begin to share God's unconditional love with others.

Humility is not degrading ourselves or feeling less than. True humility is embracing our magnificence as God created us and sharing this with the world.

There is a quote that I have carried with me for many years. I would like to share it with you.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of

God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

The last overlap is between God and neighbors or others. While this is not explicit in our passage, it is implied. I label this "Namaste" which is a concept from Hindi culture and is also a phrase and gesture used to close a group yoga practice. We hold our hands in front of our heart and bow. A literal translation of Namaste is "I bow to you." In our Christian context, it's more complete meaning is "The Christ in me recognizes and honors the Christ in you." This intersection of God and neighbor represents our understanding that everyone is a beloved child of God.

Every day we encounter many people, in physical form and in virtual form via our technology. Every one of them is a beloved child of God. This is challenging. There is always at least one someone that rides your every nerve, angers you to rage, or pushes every single button. There are those who we feel are wrong, and some we may even feel are evil. There are times that we prefer to live in righteous indignation rather than acknowledge their belovedness. And yet, we are called to let go of our agendas, to see past the exterior, to look deeply at the other and see what God sees – His precious and beloved child.

Back to the diagram. In the middle, there is a place where all three circles overlap. What happens in this intersection? What would **you** label it?? Jesus tells us the answer. Let's listen to the end of the Mark passage again.

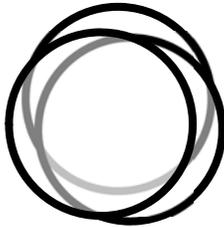
³² Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³ and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than 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."

The middle of these circles is where love for God, and self and neighbors merge. This is the sacred space that Jesus identifies as the Kingdom of God. This is where love becomes manifest. This is where the work is. Love is not an emotion; it is a verb, an action.

The Mark passage is titled the greatest commandment, to love God with your whole being, to love yourself and to love others. That seems like an insurmountable challenge in our daily lives. We are busy. There are things to do, places to go, people to meet. We juggle home, relationships, work, hobbies, other commitments. How can we possibly do this? Yet, we are called to try, to begin, one day at a time, with one person at a time. And we are not alone. Jesus is our guide and gives us a roadmap.

In the bulletin, there is a second image of overlapping circles where the center that Jesus identified as the Kingdom of God is quite large and the

areas for God, self and others fade to background. This is the image that I see in my mind's eye that describes the life of Jesus. He modeled how to live within that union of love for God, self and others that reveals the Kingdom of God in the world.



Several years ago, I participated in a Companions in Christ class that continues to stick with me. One of the weekly readings was titled "Jesus comes with friends". I will quote part of it

"As the disciples responded to Jesus individually, before they knew it, they were bound together with one another. It's always like that. When you open your life to Jesus, he never comes alone. When we open our hearts to Jesus, he comes with his arms around his brothers and sisters. He brings them all into my life. I can't say "Jesus, I want you but not your family"

This has remained with me because it speaks to daily challenges in my interactions with others in the world. There are some that I don't *want* to like, much less love. There are some that I want to judge. There are some that I want to avoid by staying safely inside my self-made bubble. But Jesus calls us to love instead, to give up our desire to be in control, to be justified, to be right. Jesus invites us in to be a part of his family, to fully engage in

radical love and compassion and justice and joy. Jesus teaches us how to live a life in the Kingdom of God through the example of his life and through his leading if we will follow.

In this way, the greatest commandment, which may seem like a burdensome task list to complete, is transformed into an invitation to experience the Kingdom of God right here and right now. We cannot go there alone. We must put God first above all else, and bring everyone we meet along with us into the love and joy and peace that God offers. This is where the life of grace, the kingdom of God is ours to experience. How will you answer the invitation?

Amen.