

## The First Commandment

<sup>28</sup>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?" <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup>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.' <sup>31</sup>The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." <sup>32</sup>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'; <sup>33</sup>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." <sup>34</sup>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.

## Deuteronomy 6 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

### The Great Commandment

**6** Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, <sup>2</sup>so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. <sup>3</sup>Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

<sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>5</sup>You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. <sup>6</sup>Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem<sup>[b]</sup> on your forehead, <sup>9</sup>and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

**November 4, 2019**

**Mark 12:28-34; Deuteronomy 6:1-9**

**“Jesus’ First Commandment”**

**Kerra Becker English**

*The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.* This may be, in order of importance, the first commandment of Jesus, and yet Jesus didn’t say it first. First it was in the Hebrew scriptures. First, it is articulated by Moses as instructions for living in the Promised Land. First it was tied to a people, Israel, who were told to listen up. First it was spoken, and then it was tied to very specific instructions as to how to remember what it said. Teach this to your children. Talk about who God is in your life no matter where you are, no matter what time it is. And just in case you might not remember – AFTER THAT – better bind it on your hand, fix it in the middle of your forehead, and keep a reminder on your front door, so that coming or going, you remember the one God, the one you love with every ounce of your being.

I don’t have a mezuzah on my front door to remember God as I leave or enter my home, but I do wonder what signs in my own life, either tangible or not so tangible, point me back to this commandment to honor God’s singularity and to commit myself to loving God with my heart, soul, mind, and strength. In my ministry, I frequently talk about how God loves us, but do I make enough mention about how we are to love God in return? Moses makes it clear. Jesus makes it clear. Our primary love, our focused love, the love that shapes who we are now and everything we might become should be our love for God. What is that supposed to mean for us?

Perhaps the most memorable illustration I ever got of this was some pre-marriage advice I got from a dear friend Evelyn Earl. Mrs. Earl taught me how to knit when I was about

Ryleigh's age, so around 11. I used to sit with her in church instead of my parents – just because I wanted to. She was the interim pastor's wife, and she let me become her friend. She tried to teach me chess too, but the moves of that game never did stick. Anyway, when I visited her years later to tell her about my engagement to Chuck, she told me a story about her own proposal. Her husband John, on asking her to marry him, said that he had to love God first, but then he asked her to marry him and love him for the rest of her days knowing that she would be second only to God. She told me that of course she said "yes," and that she never regretted being second to God. At the time, I thought it was strange advice. Aren't you supposed to put your spouse first? Is it only pastors who have to put God first, or is that supposed to be advice for all the faithful? Mrs. Earl was a good deal older than I was – she's now in her upper 90's. It was something my 24-year-old self didn't quite know how to understand particularly given our cultural expectations about romantic love and marriage.

But let's not get too bogged down in those. If all we ever learn about love is from the movies about finding "the one," we will become hopelessly ignorant about what a lifetime of love looks like. And if marriage is always about putting your spouse first, resentments can build up over time of being too tied in to just one person's needs and desires. We need our friends, our families, our life goals, and especially our relationship with God to remind us that the reality of life encompasses a very, very big picture, and the good news for us is that there is a whole lot to love, and plenty of love to go around.

So, Moses and Jesus start us out at the same point when it comes to God and when it comes to love. Know that the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. This is not the easiest sentence to translate from Hebrew to English. It can mean exclusivity – the Lord ALONE is our God. It can be the definition of radical monotheism – there's only one God – the Lord. But the one thing it

does do is solidify relationship. One God. Our God. That's it. And in my own interpretation for today – Moses and Jesus are identifying the same thing here. Religions are going to bicker and fight over many, many details, and yet both Judaism and Christianity begin with this detail, and both call it the first order of business. Hear me Israel? You got your ears on, Christians? Direct your attention to the one true God.

Once we are on the same page that God is God, then both Jesus and Moses tell us that loving God follows from that immediately. Start there and give it ALL you've got. Yes, ALL. Honor God with the love of your heart and mind. Give this love all you have in terms of strength and might. Make it your soul's work to love God, for all God is, for all God has done. Love God.

Well, that's a great commandment, but how am I, how are we going to follow it exactly? I suppose that even if I followed Moses' practical reminders for seeing the words in places that I look every day, they would only be so good as my follow through in acting upon them. Jesus has his times of telling us to remember too – in wine and bread – two things he expected to be on our tables nearly every day. When you eat and drink, remember me. That's a good reminder. I do it several times a day in fact. And those common everyday table items he used: bread, wine, living water may be even closer to me than putting words in an emblem I wear on my forehead, or even in the symbol of a cross I could wear around my neck.

Being that I plan to talk about Jesus' second commandment, loving our neighbor as ourselves, two weeks from now, I think it would be either cheating or at least jumping ahead to say that's how we are going to accomplish this goal. It's really part two. So sticking with part one: How do we begin to love the holy mystery, the power, the creative energy, the life force itself that is God? And Michael, this year's stewardship chair is probably wondering if I'm going

to get to any point anytime soon that has anything to do with this year's stewardship campaign since we are in that mode this morning too.

Well, I can tell you this. My point is not going to be if you love God, bring your money. Unfortunately, there are churches who measure themselves by exactly that goal. A person's love of God is measured by how much he or she gives, and gives, and gives to the church – in time, or energy, or money. I find that to be faulty logic, and manipulative of the congregation. Jesus didn't say that the first commandment was building churches, or starting programs, or even hiring pastors. He said it was loving God, and I certainly hope that skill is grown through your participating in church, but I find that many of the real-life skills for loving God can be woefully underrepresented in our common Christian life together. But we can revitalize and strengthen them. We can nurture them in our friends, and we can teach them to our children (Moses told us that). Children can sometimes teach it to us when we forget – says the mother speaking from this pulpit.

I'm going to list some of my favorite ways of loving God, hoping that you can add to this list, either out loud or in your own mind and heart as you reflect on this commandment.

- We come to love God through our appreciation of beauty, often through art and music. With great thanks to Karla, Austin, and the choir, sometimes even through our own singing, we are transported to connect with the divine through music. Through the artists in our congregation who draw out the creativity of others, we may have an opportunity to discover our own angels, like Sherri taught us to do at the retreat. If you weren't at the retreat – but want to make your own angel – let's talk!

- We come to love God through touching the earth and being reminded of how much it provides for us. Next week, I'm attending a seminar here in Richmond on how Celtic Spirituality has great reverence for the sacred song of the earth. I've heard many of you talk about your favorite outside places, and it reminds me of how important it is to be in those places and to sense God's presence in them. Our Memorial Garden is one of those outside places we will meet God today.
- We come to love God through Bible study. There's a sacredness to being in God's Word, and to do that well, we rely on teachers from both inside and outside the congregation. We are grateful for the seminary who sends us interns that come into our congregation with fresh insights and their own ways of interpreting God's work in the world.
- We come to love God through experiences of the holy – sometimes in worship – sometimes somewhere else, but then we are grateful for our friends at church who honor those experiences and help us live into them and understand them.
- We come to love God through quiet spaces where prayer has been happening for 147 years. Even as we paint, and change carpet, and add new pews, we are reminded that these walls have stood as testimony to a spiritual presence here for many decades.

Yours....