

Christ Church + Washington Parish
Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
November 4, 2018, Mark 12:28-34¹

“No one dared to ask him any question.” There is your clue. Your clue that something else is going on in this text than appears at first glance. Because at first glance, this text is pretty standard, core Jesus teaching – love God and love your neighbor and those things are intertwined. That’s what I thought I’d be preaching on today when I read the gospel a week ago– love. But that last line . . . what was so shocking, so silencing about this interaction? This is core Christian teaching; this is core Jewish teaching, straight from Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength – that one gets serious playtime in the book of Deuteronomy. And Love your neighbor as yourself, love even your enemy as your neighbor – that’s in Leviticus. Jesus’ audience would have known these texts by heart; they would have known how core they were to a faithful life. So, it isn’t what Jesus says that shocks them. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself – that’s core to the faith.

Your next clue does take a bit of gospel knowledge and you may have already picked up on it. This is a scribe who is talking, and when scribes talk in the gospels, it’s usually not a good thing. Scribes were educated men whose business was to study Scripture, transcribe it, and write commentaries on it, particularly in regards to the legal aspects of Scripture – the law of Moses. They were often respected by the community because of their knowledge, dedication, and outward appearance of Law-keeping. But the shadow side of that was that sometimes their interpretation went beyond Scripture, and they added man-made traditions to what God said.

¹ *Disclaimer: I do not read my sermons so actual wording of sermon may be different when preached. Lots of grace would be appreciated for grammatical errors as I both write for the ear and spend time on delivery rather than doing a thorough editing.*

They had a tendency, according to the gospels, to focus on the letter of the law while ignoring the spirit behind it, treating minor laws just as importantly as major laws so to speak. Thus the scribes become frequent foes as Jesus focuses on the major aspects of God's teachings in tension with some of the minor ones and customs that more legalistic scribes and Pharisees focused on. In fact, in the gospel of Mark, the scribes, as a faceless character group, are even intimately involved in the conspiracy to kill Jesus. A scribe that asks a question sincerely, agrees with Jesus' answer, and Jesus agrees with his response – that is not the typical interaction between Jesus and the scribes.

Your third clue in today's text comes if you were to look at the verses around this one in chapter 12. Now there aren't Bibles in the pews, but if you have a Bible on your phone, you have my explicit permission to get your phone out and look up Mark 12. This scene falls square in the middle of debate time for Jesus. There are three Jewish groups that Jesus routinely comes into tension with in the gospels - the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes. These are three distinct groups within Judaism who lean different directions in interpretation of the faith. Just like there is a diversity of interpretations and focuses among Christian denominations. Jesus is distinguishing himself from them, and they are testing him – the Sadducees and Pharisees hope to trip him up and make him look foolish or get him in trouble with the Roman authorities. Jesus responds to them not as benevolent, wise teacher, but as skilled debater, turning the tables on them in each response. The Pharisees ask him about whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, hoping to get him in trouble with the Romans. The Sadducees have a convoluted question about resurrection of the dead meant to insult the concept of it. Then, there is this interaction between a scribe and Jesus. Then, Jesus mocks the scribes for believing that the

Messiah is the son of David (I don't understand this one because we still say that today about Jesus) but Jesus is very clearly pointing this out as a ludicrous concept. Then, Jesus calls the scribes hypocrites and tells people to wary of them because they “devour widow’s houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” Now that’s all a lot of information, but what I want you to see this sequence of what Jesus says.

Pharisees, I’m not stupid enough to get caught in your question trap

Sadducees, you are asking silly questions

Scribe, you are not far from the kingdom of God.

Scribes you believe ridiculous things

Scribes – you are a bunch of pious hypocrites who prey on the vulnerable.

So now you see why Jesus and this scribe having a positive exchange stick out.

Perhaps you are also wondering whether Jesus would have done surprisingly well in today’s political climate, insulting those who disagree with them, dodging questions meant to trip him up, riling up the crowd to be on his side. This is not how we like to think about Jesus. This is not how I like to think about Jesus, but here it is. Sometimes Scripture is prescriptive, telling us how to live or how the world could look more like the kingdom of God – like the Ten Commandments, proverbs, the Sermon on the Mount, and sometimes Scripture is descriptive telling us the reality of life – like all the wars and history in the Old Testament or the debates in the early church in the New Testament. It looks far less holy and far more like the world we are familiar with. And sometimes the two things are clearly intertwined, which is actually a good thing, because unless it describes real life, the prescriptions on how to live are kind of irrelevant.

So here, it's real. Mark is describing a contentious situation where the religious parties are debating things that were important to them at the time. Can you be a faithful Jew and a good citizen under an oppressive authority? How important are all the laws that governed Jewish life 700 years ago to us today? Is there a resurrection of the dead? Who is the Messiah going to be? Important questions. Jesus and his debaters are heated up about them. Both sides believe in their cause; they believe they are right; they believe they are on God's side, and they believe the other side is wrong and is leading people astray. These are important questions to them worthy of debate. But they aren't **the question**.

The question is the one the scribe asks, "What is the most important thing to living the faith?" Acknowledge God, love God with all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself. That is one commandment; they are inextricably intertwined – if you aren't doing all three, then you aren't doing one of them. The most important thing is not whether you pay taxes (or how much taxes you believe in paying) or in this law or that law, the most important thing is worshipping God, loving God, loving your neighbor. The scribe both agrees. Everyone gathered around Jesus agrees. We all would agree.

Now I don't want to say how Jesus acts here is okay; I dream of a day where our debates and disagreements with each other (theological, political, or just about stuff) with each other will be about ideas and civilized and the pure pursuit of what is best. But all signs indicate that that doesn't come naturally to us humans, so we have a far way to go. But it isn't sinful to have heated disagreements. It isn't sinful to get riled up and say things we wouldn't say in a calmer, more reflective moment. We may regret it, but it isn't sinful.

What is sinful . . . what is sinful . . . is to ignore what God has told us again and again is most important. To let our beliefs, our values, our emotions, as important as they may be, blind us to what God has said is the most important – love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Because when we turn away from that, we turn away from God, and that is sin. You may be right about everything else, but if you don't love your neighbor, the person you disagree with, the person who you think not a single intelligent thing has come out of their mouths, you are wrong about what matters the most.

I can't imagine Jesus expected the scribe to agree with him; he was probably ready for a little verbal judo, maybe even the scribe was too. But the scribe stopped and listened to Jesus before he asked the question, and Jesus listened to the scribe, and they acknowledged their shared core values. It didn't end the debate, but it did insert a reminder that winning a battle of ideas isn't the most important thing. Living faithfully always means loving God and loving our neighbor, even as we raise our voices, infuse our passions, into all the other questions. If we lose our footing there, we will find ourselves further from the kingdom of God.

How to love God and neighbor? Another sermon, right? Yes, it is, but I'll end this one with what I hope is a helpful tip – keep asking yourself how. Don't let go of the question. Ask it every day. Your words and actions will be shaped by you holding it close with your heart, soul, and mind, and strength.