

LOVE'S CALL TO SEE

Mark 12:28-34

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“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind...and your neighbor as yourself...” Since this is called The Great Commandment, we have to be careful not to create a new legalism—as if we can earn merit points with God, as if it originates with us. It is God’s gift, God’s initiative. We open our hearts and receive Christ, God’s fullest expression of love. And through it, we are able to see God and neighbor.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind... (v. 30). Note the repetitive “all.” It is without reservation, with our entire being, nothing held back. Loving God calls for a single, laser focus.

The second command is to love neighbor as we love ourselves. Recent brain science has located “mirror neurons, responsible for our ability to feel with others, as if the feeling were our own.” This is what we call empathy, moving into a place where we are feeling what the other is going through [“Understanding Empathy: Current State and Future Research Challenges,” by Changmin Duan and Kristen Sager, *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 3rd ed.]. Learning to truly see others, exactly what Jesus taught!

As I prepared the message this week, I learned something new. There is a very specific reason that Mark begins Jesus’ famous statements about loving God and neighbor with a quote from the First Testament, the *shema*, which Jews of Jesus’ day recited twice a day, every day. “The Lord our God, the Lord is one...” (v. 29). Charles Cousar points out that we aren’t just called to love any god, but this particular God, the God of Israel’s history, the one revealed in Jesus Christ. Not some tribal god, some trinket god, some war god or national god [*Texts for Preaching—Year B*, p.574].

The church today is full of functional atheists. We say we believe in God, but we don’t believe in the God who sees everyone—the broken, despised, sinful. The God who sees and loves deeply and passionately. The great preacher George Buttrick once wrote that “Jesus saw nothing on earth but faces; nothing in heaven but faces; nothing in hell but faces” [*Jesus Came Preaching*, p. 120].

Stop and think with me about all the ways Jesus taught us that love allows us to see. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). Remember the famous story of the Good Samaritan? The religious folk—priest and Levite—failed to see. “A priest was going down the road and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. A Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But when a Samaritan saw him, he was moved with pity” (Luke 10:31-33). Remember the famous parable of the last judgment, the sheep and the goats? When we have done it to the least of these, we have done it to Christ. Remember

the surprise of some who thought they had checked all the religious boxes: “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” (Matthew 25:44). Our love calls us to see!

I’ll never forget the lady who joined a small country church in North Missouri. All the members told her, “There aren’t any young families or children in this area. We’re dying. So, this newcomer started following the school bus each afternoon and noting the houses where children lived. Needless to say, the church began to grow! Because she saw people.

There is a reason this passage of scripture is called the Great Commandment. Every individual and every church must continually re-evaluate, repeatedly asking, are we lining up our mission and life around loving God and loving others? Are we lining up our personal behavior, choices and words accordingly? Are we seeing God and seeing others? And if not, why not?

A college student once visited the office of a famous theologian because the student feared he was losing his faith. He asked the professor what books he should read. The teacher advised the student not to read a book but go and serve the poor in that huge city. His faith would be rekindled. He would be able to see both God and others. And the teacher also told him, frankly, that’s where he would find the true church!