

GIFTS OF LOVE: The Greatest Commandment

Mark 12:28-34

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Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/gifts-of-love-the-greatest-commandment/>

I.

Well, friends, it is the Sunday before a very significant day. Tuesday is November 5. This day brings a lot of strong opinions, fiery energy, and anticipation, which is not surprising. Because November 5 is National “Love Your Red Hair” Day! Nearly all of us know at least one individual with red hair, even though they make up less than 2% of the population. They deserve a day to be celebrated because we love them, and we also fear them. They can take as many days as they want.

Of course, that is not the only thing happening on November 5. November 5 is also *National Chinese Takeout Day*! Indeed, it is a day with something for everyone and maybe a good fortune or two.

I don’t know if you heard, but November 5 this year is also Election Day in the United States. Citizens across the country will exercise their right to vote. Voting is a privilege and every election matters. So, if you haven’t already done so, make a plan to vote on Tuesday.

This year, I voted early. On Thursday, I walked one block to the county clerk’s office to cast my vote. As I walked, I prayed. Short walk, short prayer. But I have been praying for a long time for God’s wisdom to guide me, so my vote might help make this world more like the one God envisions. I know you pray as you vote, too—even if our prayers lead us to darken different circles.

As I walked up the stairs, the line of early voters twisted around that tiny lobby. As we waited, strangers who are also neighbors joked and laughed about how we all came around 2 p.m. to avoid the lunch rush, and perhaps no one was there over lunch because we all had the same brilliant idea.

As I marked my choices, I thought of the 30 or so other folks in that room who quietly marked theirs, and I was moved. Voting is a moment of unity in our community. We may not agree on every issue or candidate, but we hold in common the belief in every citizen’s right to vote or not vote if they so choose.

II.

Sometimes, we need to remember what we hold in common.

The people of Israel held in common a covenant with God. Unlike other nations with multiple gods, Israel had one God—a God who asked for their complete love and loyalty. This God called them to be a peculiar and particular people who love this one true God with all their heart,

soul, and strength and love their neighbors as themselves. Most ancient cultures around them believed God's image was placed on people, but just certain people — the leaders, the kings, and the queens. The elite were the ones who bore God's image. But the Israelites believed God placed God's image on ALL people, including those not included, like the vulnerable, the oppressed, and the foreigner. Because the image of God was on all people, they were to love their neighbors as themselves.

What held the nation of Israel together for centuries, regardless of their tribal affiliations, age, gender, class, or religious grouping, was this common covenant to love the Lord your God with all that you are and do and to love your neighbor as yourself.

III.

In Mark 12, Jesus is teaching in the temple courts of Jerusalem when a scribe, an expert in the Hebrew law, asks a question: “Which commandment is the first of all?” (v.28)

Scribes usually appear in the Gospels as critics of Jesus, watching his every move and waiting for him to slip up so they can undermine him. But not this scribe. Unlike the same account in Matthew's Gospel, which describes the scribe as “testing” Jesus, Mark's Gospel presents this scribe as genuinely interested. He's not here to trap Jesus; he's here to learn. So, when he asks, “Out of all 600+ commandments about what to do and not do, what is the greatest commandment?” he's genuinely seeking wisdom.

Jesus responds with words some of you know well: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (v.29-31)

The first commandment, found in Deuteronomy 6, is known as the *Shema*, which means “hear” in Hebrew. The *Shema* was, and still is, recited daily by observant Jewish people. Both the scribe and Jesus, as observant Jews, likely began and closed each day reciting the *Shema*, which begins, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” - a command that calls Israel's attention to allegiance and complete commitment to God alone.

The second commandment wasn't unheard of, either. Another prominent rabbi around the same time as Jesus summed up the whole Law in similar terms, and the writings of the prophets and the structure of the Ten Commandments also talk of love for neighbor.

Neither the scribe nor Jesus were putting out new information. Nothing is surprising about Jesus's answer to the scribe.

What happens next is what is astounding. The scribe, rather than challenging or debating Jesus, wholeheartedly agrees! He even echoes Jesus' words, affirming that to love God and to love neighbor is indeed “much more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Two people, often at odds in scripture and our minds, are not debating doctrine, politics, or tradition. Instead, they're united in what they hold in common – a shared belief that love is at the heart of the covenant.

Jesus responds to the scribe with words we seldom hear Him say: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

It makes me wonder if that scribe came near and listened to the members of Christ's church quarreling with one another today, I wonder if he might conclude that Christians today are far, very far from the kingdom.

IV.

Elections can bring out the best and the worst in people, can't they? Emotions run high, opinions clash, and it's easy to fall into the mindset of “us vs. them.” I imagine we all have had moments in this season where fear takes hold, and we've thought, or worse said, things not of love to those we disagree with.

Especially in times like these, it's easy to get caught up in the mentality of testing or challenging others to defend our stance and prove ourselves right. But this encounter between Jesus and the scribe reminds us that the covenant to love is not just a set of beliefs we hold in isolation. It's a commitment that shapes how we interact with others. In this passage, the love of God and the love of neighbor are inseparable. Loving God, Jesus says, compels us to respect and love others. It is two sides of the same coin.

At times, it may feel like the world is deeply fractured and that love itself is naive or inadequate to the issues we face. But in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul writes that love never fails. Empires rise and fall, leaders come and go, but love endures. And as Christians, we are entrusted with embodying God's love in a world that desperately needs it. We are to steward the gift of love.

This love isn't about feelings but committed action—a daily choice to serve, forgive, and welcome. It will take each of us making little decisions in our little worlds to love, not just our neighbors, but even to pray for our enemies, our president, and our country. Loving our neighbors doesn't mean we agree with everything they believe, nor must they agree with us. To love our neighbor is to receive the gift of God's generous and gracious love for us and then extend that gift of love to others for the glory of God and the good of the world. This kind of love is not something we can muster up on our own. The love for neighbor flows out of our living and loving relationship with God.

IV.

In a heated election season, political yard signs can sometimes pit neighbors against neighbors. Virginia Beach resident Lily Anderson is an English teacher who worked overseas and moved back home last year to help her mother. She became frustrated with the bitterness permeating the presidential election and wanted to remind people about what really matters. “Politics are important, but they are not the most important thing,” she said. So, Anderson countered the

ugliness swirling around the election landscape with a different kind of lawn sign. It features a simple message: “Whoever wins, we’ll still be neighbors.”ⁱ

Whenever the election results are official, and in a race this close, it won’t be Tuesday night, but whenever we know, at least half of our country will breathe a sigh of relief while the other half will feel like the wind has been knocked out of them.

What does love look like after such an election?

It won’t look like gloating while others are grieving.

It won’t look like vilifying or vindication.

It won’t look like proclaiming the hope or the end of the world has come.

After next week, we will still have to live together in this flawed union that we are trying to form into a more perfect one. While the political air is unlikely to be clear for a while, what is clear is whoever wins, we’ll still be neighbors. Our love and commitment to God and our neighbor don’t change based on who wins or loses. As stewards of God’s love, we are called to reach across the divides, see the image of God in the other, and commit to building God’s kingdom regardless of leaders or laws. Those both come and go, but love remains.

The scribe who questioned Jesus understood that loving God and neighbor was at the heart of the law. Jesus says we are not far from the kingdom when we live in this love. The challenge for us is to embrace a kingdom vision that includes all people, not just those who share our beliefs. This doesn’t mean compromising our faith; it means expanding our vision of how God’s love is at work in our world.

Maybe the invitation this season is to remember what we have in common as Christ followers and live out the heart of our covenant in a way that honors God. This doesn’t mean avoiding important conversations or pretending our convictions don’t matter. It doesn’t mean ignoring that there are consequential decisions on the ballot that will significantly impact lives – some more than others. It does mean approaching others—even those we disagree with—with love and respect.

V.

Our tagline at First Baptist is #seewhatlovecando. So, friends, let’s see. Let’s show the world what it looks like to hold fast to a covenant that transcends all divides. Let’s be a peculiar and particular people who surprise the world by choosing love over hate. Let’s love our neighbors as we love ourselves, seeing the image of God in all people, yes, even in those we disagree with. Let’s enter this week with hearts full not of fear but of gratitude and love, praying God’s kingdom will come more fully in and through us.

This Tuesday, order some Chinese takeout, tell a redhead in your life how much you appreciate them, go and vote, and, most importantly, recommit yourself to the heart of the covenant we

hold in common. May you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Do this as if it's the most important thing in all the world...because it is.ⁱⁱ Amen.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://www.pilotonline.com/2024/11/01/well-still-be-neighbors-virginia-beach-yard-sign-aims-to-counter-political-divisiveness/>

ⁱⁱ Preston Clegg Benediction, Second Baptist Church, Little Rock, Arkansas