

Mark 12:28-34
Deuteronomy 6

Two Sides Of The Story

This has happened to me with my children. This has happened to me in youth ministry. This has happened to me with my adult friends and at church. Some one comes and tells me a story. Boy do they have a perspective. They lay out the chain of events. They report what people said. They make a list of everything that happened. They lay it out in chronological order. They are really upset. They have been done dirt and they are feeling wronged and I feel sorry for them. I nod my head in sympathy. I think to myself isn't that terrible the way that went down. Sometimes I even get upset or angry on their behalf.

Then I hear the other side of the story from a different person or a third party and a lot of the facts are the same but shaded differently and lot of the facts are in deed different and I find myself wondering; were these people even in the same room? Are they talking about the same thing? Very often there are two sides to every story.

When we visit with Jesus in the Gospel of Mark we are post Palm Sunday. Jesus is in Jerusalem and he is challenging the temple authorities. He is debating theology and politics with them.

He is questioning their assumptions. He is dissatisfied with the way they lead. He feels they lead a faith of motions that does not honor God. He is very clear that they do not have a heart for the people. Jesus is meddling.

The temple authorities have their own perspective. Some of them sympathize with Jesus but by and large they don't see Jesus as God's son. They don't see him as a reformer or savior. They see him as a threat. The Pharisees, the Sadducees engage Jesus in debate. They seek to entrap him. He may be popular. He may be right sometimes, but by golly his word means change and they don't have change in mind. There are perks that come with being in charge and they don't intend any personal sacrifice. Most them had come to some sort of accommodation with Rome and they were wealthy because of it.

There comes along a Scribe who truly doesn't seem to be looking for trouble. According to Mark, He asks Jesus a serious question. "Which commandment is the first of all?" This was actually one of the hot button issues among the religious scholars of the day. This question about which was the first commandment was fiercely explored by all who tried to be faithful. This scribe is

interested in discussion not debate. It is as if he interviewing Jesus on a Sunday afternoon TV news show. He would like to learn. He is genuinely interested in the opinion of the celebrity rabbi from backwater secular Nazareth.

Jesus' answer was heartfelt, tradition based and fresh as a spring flower. "The first is, "Hear , O Israel, 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."

Jesus roots himself solidly in the tradition of Deuteronomy. He quotes from a very well known section of the Old Testament called the Shema; five verses in Deuteronomy 6. But even though the scribe only asked for the greatest commandment Jesus moves forward and add a second, quoting from Leviticus 19:18. "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The two sides of faith are to Love God completely and to Love neighbor as much as self. These two sides of faith are not in conflict – they are hand in glove. It's like holding a faith coin in your hand. Heads is God. Tails is Neighbor. They come together.

Two weeks ago we read the Ten Commandments in worship – most of us can probably remember 7 or 8 of them. Interesting fact about the Ten Commandments is that they were chiseled into two stone tablets. Some Rabbis say that there were five commandments on one tablet and five commandments on the other. Some Rabbis says that there were ten commandments chiseled into each of the two tablets. One Tablet was God's copy of the covenant and one tablet was the copy that belonged to the people of Israel. Since the stone tablets are long lost, this will remain a debate for some time.

Other students of scripture agree that there are two sides of the Ten Commandments but that these two sides had not so much to do with stone tablets as the content of the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments as Reformed Protestants count them are all about God. You Shall have no other God, No Graven images or idols, No cussing in God's name and you shall honor God by keeping the Sabbath. The first four honor the Creator.

The next six commandments are about how God wants us to treat people. Honor your parents, don't murder, commit adultery or steal, do not bear false witness and do not covet other peoples belongings.

The first four Commandments are summarized by Jesus in the first of his two great commandments. He calls us to love God with all our hearts, all our soul, and our entire mind. The Next Six Commandments are summarized by Jesus with the words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus does not deny the Ten Commandments or replace them. He cleverly and succinctly summarizes them. “There is no other commandment greater than these.”

A Scribe is one who has a great deal of his life wrapped up in the religious practices and customs of the day. A scribe is well studied in the intricacies of the Torah – the first five books of the Bible. A Scribe is someone who was thought of as being close to God. So when Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 – this scribe knows exactly from where comes Jesus’ wisdom.

Jesus was reaching to the very heart of Judaism and lifting up what already was contained. What is new perhaps, is Jesus’ linking of the Deuteronomy passage called the Shema, with the passage from Leviticus about the neighbor. What is new is the connecting of love and care and justice for all neighbors with the love of God. In fact, Jesus is pretty much saying that if you don’t love your neighbors

– all of them – near and far away – then you really don't love God, because these two loves are not just connected they are intertwined. There is no love of God – not really – if you have not love for humanity and especially the powerless. And we are not talking about sending Valentines cards to the whole world here – we are talking working for a world – where there is fairness, freedom, food and health for all people; human rights as prescribed by our maker. To love your neighbor is to work for a community and world where people are respected and cared for and held up simply because they are creations and children of God.

This Scribe realizes Jesus' point. He sees the light filled heaven born wisdom and he himself has a revelation. "It's true Jesus what you say. We must love God with all our being and we must care for our neighbor. In fact Jesus, loving God by loving neighbor is so important that burnt offerings and sacrifices don't mean dirt and the contemporary and traditional worship services of the far future are pure fluff, if these people are not on the path of working for a just world." And Jesus says to the scribe "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." This is no conflict. We have here in scripture two people in complete sync; Jesus and the scribe on the same page.

Now neither the scribe nor Jesus were saying that neighbor comes before God. God comes first. That is why the primary act of any Christian Community is worship. What they are saying is that your worship of God is incomplete and in fact half hearted if it is not accompanied by a genuine love for humanity.

There is a curious back door twist that comes with Jesus teaching that not every one catches. When Jesus commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves; he is assuming that you do love yourself. You need to respect yourself and take care of yourself before you can take care of others while at the same time you need to avoid turning self love into an acquisitive form of idolatry. The desire to acquire is powerful in our culture and yet paradoxically there are many in our culture who do not love or even respect themselves.

Jesus could have said that there were three great commandments. He could have said go out there and make everybody a Christian just like you but he left the list at two. He could have said threaten them with hell. But when it came time to come to the point; The Gospel said Jesus is two things – Loving God with heart soul strength and mind. The Gospel says Jesus is loving

neighbor as self. This is God's call to humanity. You know you are on the right track when you are living these two sides of the story.

Which leads me to a few short reflections on our hosting of the Winter Relief Homeless Shelter:

Thank you for your generosity and hard work as a congregation on the Winter Relief Homeless Shelter. Thank you to the team that worked so hard and so long to organize us. Thanks especially to our leaders Carol and Clay Josh and Scott. We faced the unknown and we encountered several surprises but we were ready because of the adroit leadership in this church. We were prepared to serve.

Secondly – Wow that was some kind of commitment wasn't it. It was a pile of hard work, people rolled up their sleeves and went well beyond ordinary and expectations ---and believe me I could hear the collective sigh of relief from satisfied hard workers this week as everyone recovered or "sabbathed" from the hard work of serving people in need. I wanted to thank you all last Sunday in worship and share a communal sense of satisfaction and delight but I also wanted to be considerate of our guests.

Thirdly Wow – You were not far from the kingdom of God. Something happened in this church last week. There was this wonderful balance of Loving God and Loving Neighbor. There were many insights granted and holy moments shared. We received gifts from our guests as they received a gift from us. Neighbors we suspected would be hard to love, weren't all that hard to love and weren't as terribly different from us as we imagined. Nameless faces and theoretical challenges became real people with real feelings, real problems and real dilemmas and we grew from their presence.

Loving God with all our heart soul mind and strength, we reached out to neighbor with genuine hospitably. We answered the Call of Jesus.