

Mark 12:28-34

Happy All Hallows Eve! We will be celebrating All Saints and Remembrance Sunday next week – but today we’re going to focus on Jesus’ teaching of the greatest commandment. In our children’s curriculum in Godly Play the kids are taught the 10 commandments but they’re referred to as the “10 best ways” – in the Gospels Jesus offers us 1 best way and it is summarized very simply in the command to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. I am reminded of GK Chesterton’s comment about this command when he said, “The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.” A few of us might relate.

And you’ve probably noticed by now that our stewardship campaign has a simple theme of love: loving God, each other, and our neighbors. One reason I so appreciate this year’s theme is because when we think of stewardship or giving, it’s important to be reminded that this is not an isolated concept. Stewardship is not something we do at a certain time of year that is relegated to one small area of our lives. It’s about a whole way of living and relating to God and to the world, and understanding that, like it or not, we are all stewards of all that we have, of all that we are, and of all that we do...and the best we can do is to live loving God and others.

So, I think the real challenge for us as followers of Jesus is discernment: it’s asking the question: How will I love God and my neighbors? What will that look like in my life? And I think there are 2 pitfalls we face in trying to live out this all-encompassing command to love. The first pitfall we can fall into is to romanticize and therefore trivialize the command to love. We imagine loving others as feeling good, as being pleasant in most cases and often as being easy- like baking a batch of cookies. And sometimes love is that easy and does feel good like that. But if we’re honest we know that the call to love was a call to sacrifice and that love is in fact often extremely difficult and stretches us in ways we will often find just plain uncomfortable. The second pitfall, however, is to imagine that loving God and our neighbors is so big and so extreme that it’s beyond us and so we don’t practice in concrete and intentional ways. We feel overwhelmed by the call to love

everyone and so we don’t become intentional about practicing daily the way we might otherwise.

The solution to avoiding these pitfalls and loving God and others is to commit to it, to be assured that we can do it with God’s help, and then discern for ourselves practical and concrete ways we can put love into action every day. And today I’d like to offer one tangible, practical way that all of us here at St. James could live loving our neighbors daily that I believe has become imperative.

One writer described this practice in a really helpful way this past week. It comes from the Rev. Tish Warren Harrison, an Anglican priest whose book [we] read during the pandemic. She wrote an Op-Ed for the Times that begins with these words: “The nation is coming apart. The world is in turmoil. We need to chat about the weather. I mean this sincerely.”

She goes on to describe the loathing that so many Americans currently have for one another, and she reflects on the ways that malice and disdain for others are spiritual and moral issues of the soul. I agree and I have to tell you – this call to love our neighbors strikes at the heart of what may be the biggest moral disease and sin facing us as people right now: the hatred, scorn, malice and loathing we have for one another in our current context in America. As followers of Jesus, we can do better – and we must do better. So, if we are going to love God and our neighbors, we are going to need practical ways to reverse these trends. And that is where this practice comes in. The Rev. Harrison writes:

“To learn how to love our neighbors we need cultural habits that allow us to share in our common humanity. We need quiet, daily practices that rebuild social trust. And we need seemingly pointless conversation with those around us. The great urban activist Jane Jacobs wrote about the social function of casual conversations and interactions: greeting your grocer, passing a pleasantry with a neighbor, playing peekaboo with a toddler at the crosswalk... ‘The sum of such casual, public contact at a local level...is a feeling for the public identity of a people, a web of public respect and trust.’... the absence of this trust is a ‘disaster’ to a city.... Of course, to heal the deep divisions in our society we need profound political and systemic change. But though we need more than just small talk,

we certainly do not need less than that. ...We cannot build a culture of peace and justice if we can't talk with our neighbors. It's in these many small conversations where we begin to recognize the familiar humanity in one another. These are the baby steps of learning to live together across differences."

Dear ones – we need daily habits – we need the spiritual practice of simply and intentionally engaging in kindly, casual friendly interactions with those we encounter –with strangers and those who live and work in our local contexts. It can be uncomfortable and may stretch us –and there is some risk involved, especially given our current cultural milieu. But this practice is a ministry of love – of loving our neighbors – it is the first step in moving us into a different kind of culture and context and we, as followers of Jesus, can lead the way. Imagine all the ways you might practice it: online for instance, with those you pass by, thanking those who wait on you, engaging with people you encounter on the street, at church, at work, at school, at the store, at the coffee shop, at the bank, at your favorite restaurant, at the drive through, on the phone – you name it. It can start with the practice of simply smiling and go from there. And yes, we can certainly take it several steps farther –like genuinely stopping to help someone in need – but we need to start somewhere. What might your life look like if you practiced this ministry of love of neighbor this way?

When my son Graysen was a toddler, he was prone to frequent and dramatic meltdowns in public when he became overstimulated because he has been diagnosed with a sensory processing dysfunction. His meltdowns would often peak when we were in a long line at the store, and I have more than my fair share of horror stories in line at Target. But let me contrast 2 very different reactions I would receive in public on those days. At times those around us in line would give me dirty looks, sigh, shake their heads or look simply annoyed- and my anxiety would build. I remember people in line saying to others things like, "What a spoiled brat" or "That mom doesn't know how to parent" and even "Take that kid out of here." I would often cry in the car on the way home on those days – my embarrassment mixed with hurt. But on other occasions, and I recall a few in particular, someone in line around us would give me words of encouragement

like – "I remember how hard those years can be" or "You've got this." Some would try and distract Graysen with stickers or gum – one woman offered us a granola bar from her shopping cart, another offered to buy a small toy for him in the aisle, and someone once offered to take my groceries to my car so that I could carry Graysen in my arms who was sobbing. I can't tell you what those small interactions meant to me then...what a difference it made to our lives. The small pleasantries can be anything but small at times – and at times like these in our nation.

Dear ones –the greatest command to love God and our neighbors is within our reach even though it may be challenging and may stretch us – but it is imperative that we heed the call to love others in practical, tangible, concrete ways – and we can start today – with a smile and talking about the weather.

Amen.