

Mark 12:28-34

2 John 4-6

November 4, 2018

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**STEP UP. STEP OUT.
WALKING IN LOVE**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Late Wednesday afternoon I went to Food Lion to buy candy for trick-or-treaters. As I walked from my car to the store, a couple came walking towards me. I had to laugh when I saw her sweatshirt. It said, “I’m not short. I’m Fun Size!” I went in and bought four bags of “Fun Size” 3 Musketeers Bars, and I laughed again. You know what I’m talking about — with the “Fun Size” bite-sized candy bars, you can easily rationalize eating more than one. After all, they’re bite-sized! And even if you’re able to eat only one, you get the essence of the candy in that bite-sized candy.

As I was working on this sermon, I read a description of Jesus’ answer to the scribe as “two bite-sized lessons.” With his two short responses to the scribe’s question, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus exposed the essence of the life and walk of faith — “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” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The apostle Paul echoed Jesus’ lessons in his letter to the Galatians when he wrote, “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Galatians 5:14)

In her blog about this story in Mark’s gospel, which she titled “The Politics of the Greatest Commandment,” Amy Allen describes what it means to call the commandment to love God with everything you’ve got “first of all.” She writes, “To be ‘first’ in this context came closer to the idea of being the first stone laid — the cornerstone, upon which all of the other stones must rest. Consequently, the greatness of the love commandment lies not in its surpassing value over and against all of the other commandments of Jewish law, but, rather, in its ability to *hold up* all the rest. . . The recitation of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 6:4 begins with the declaration, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone,’ not because God’s ego is so big that God has to get out the door first, but because God is so big that it is only on this promise that the rest of the commandments can possibly rest.”¹

Today’s epistle lesson and sermon text from 2 John is something of a commentary on the gospel reading about which is the first commandment of all. Let me read John’s words again, and I invite you, once again, to substitute the word “live” every time you hear the word “walk.”

“I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I

were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning — you must walk in it.”

When Jesus talked with his disciples the night before he died, he told them, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34) But this “new” commandment is, as John says in his letter, “one we have had from the beginning . . . one you have have heard from the beginning.” You can find the commandment(s) to love God and to love neighbor in the oldest Jewish law in Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. Maybe the “newness” of the love commandment comes from the fact that we have to hear it over and over again from our Lord and God.

The body of Jewish law is known as the *halakah*. In a nutshell, the *halakah* is the practical application of all of the commandments. In light of our Stewardship theme this fall — “Step Up. Step Out.” — it’s helpful to note that while *halakah* is often translated as “Jewish law,” it literally means “the way to behave,” and even more literally, “the way of walking.” The Old Testament books of Isaiah and Proverbs are full of walk talk:

- * “My child, do not walk in [the way of sinners], keep your feet from their paths; for their feet run to evil, and they hurry to shed blood.” (Isaiah 1:15-16)
- * I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice.” (Proverbs 8:20)
- * “Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.” (Proverbs 9:6)
- * “Whoever walks in integrity walks securely.” (Proverbs 10:9)
- * “Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one’s ways even though rich.” (Proverbs 28:6)

One person has suggested that the scribe’s question to Jesus about what is the first commandment is, in essence, a question about “how to lead a life of moral integrity.”² I think it’s also fair to say that the “bite-sized lessons” about loving God and neighbor and walking according to Jesus’ commandments are about stewardship. We make the mistake in the church of equating stewardship with fundraising and trying to meet an annual budget. But stewardship — in its broadest, richest, farthest-reaching sense — is all about “how to lead a life of moral integrity,” about how to live an integrated life shaped, first and foremost, by our love for God and for our neighbor.

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in the 4th/5th centuries, preached a sermon on 1 John 4:4-12. The “bite-sized lesson” in those verses is the same as in 2 John and Mark 12 — “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:11) A much quoted line from Augustine’s sermon says, “Love, and do what you will,” or “Love God, and do what you will.” That sounds as if all we have to do is love God, and we can do whatever we want to do. What a great system! It’s kind of like when folks say, “The Bible says you can ask God for anything you want in prayer and you’ll get it.” I don’t think so, because both of those interpretations ignore one very important thing — living a life, walking the path, integrated into God’s will.

As always, context makes a HUGE difference. Listen to what Augustine said in his sermon: “Once for all, then, a short precept is given unto you: Love God, and do what you will: whether you hold your peace, through love hold your peace; whether you cry out, through love cry out; whether you correct, through love correct; whether you spare, through love do you spare: In all things, let the root of love be within, for of this root can nothing spring but what is good.” A commentator writes, “When the love of God is the governing principle of our lives, then all that we think, say, and do will necessarily be yielded to that love. If our love of God is real and profound, then obedience and faithfulness, right thinking and right actions will flow irresistibly from that love.”³

In one of my sermons in August 2017, I told you about Rev. Bruce Reyes Chow, the preacher at the Montreat Youth Conference for the week we attended with the group from the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina. Each night he would end his sermon with this benediction:

*Go forth into the world
With compassion and justice in your heart
Give strength to the weak
Give voice to the silent
See one another
Hear one another
Care for one another
And love one another
It's all that easy
And it's all that hard*

It didn't take long before all of us in the congregation were joining in and saying “It's all that easy And it's all that hard.” Because it is — on both counts! One of my Facebook friends is a woman named Blanche. Almost every day, Blanche posts some very fine, groan-inducing puns, which I dutifully pass along to some of you. Blanche also regularly shares poems and prayers and writings by Thom Shuman. Wouldn't you know it? She posted one of Thom's writings earlier this week, a reflection on Mark's story about Jesus and the scribe talking about and *agreeing on* what is the first commandment of all. It's called “then what.”

*then what
did they go off
and share a pizza
and a pitcher;
did they agree
to disagree;
did they shake their heads
as the other walked away;
did one say,
'if you knew*

*my neighbors
the way I do;'
while the other laughed,
'if you knew
God the way I do;'*

*after they agreed
that love was what
was most important,
yet almost impossible
to live out,
what did they do next?*

You've heard me tell this story before, but it is said that when the apostle John was a very old man, his disciples would carry him into the midst of the congregation at Ephesus so he could preach. All he was able to say to the believers each week was, "Little children, love one another." After a number of weeks went by, his disciples (who were getting kind of tired of hearing the same thing week after week) asked him, "Master, why do you always say this?" John replied, "Because it is the Lord's command, and if this only is done, it is enough."⁴

It's a question of living a life of moral integrity, an integrated life, of walking our talk of love, which is to say, it's a matter of stewardship, of stepping up and stepping out in all of life. Along those lines, I came across these thoughts from Rev. David Sellery about "Love God. Love neighbor."

"But don't confuse Christ's lesson of love with the sentimental moonshine that popular culture teaches us to expect. Jesus knew precisely what he was asking when he summarized what God expects of us. He knows our obligations, our limitations, our conflicts. Loving God and neighbor does not dismiss any of these realities. It puts them in perspective. Large or small, we must bring love to the tasks of today. We work in the love of God. We eat, sleep and rise in his presence. Every task is an opportunity to return and to spread his love. The joy, the sorrow, the boredom, the routines of our day: all are there to be undertaken in love. As Mother Teresa reminds us: 'It is not how much we do that is pleasing to God, but how much love we put into the doing.' Love God. Love neighbor. Learn it. Live it. Rejoice in it . . . as God rejoices in you."⁵

Every once in a while, I get an email cartoon called "Agnus Day," which comments on Bible verses. The characters are two sheep named Rick and Ted. This week's strip has Ted asking Rick, "No one asked any more questions?" "No," says Rick, "they tried to make Jesus appear foolish but as Jesus speaks of loving one's neighbor, they see that Jesus is wise." In the last panel, Ted crosses his arms and says, "Yeah . . . I guess — but it sounds like they've never met my neighbor."

There's the rub, isn't it? We live in an enormously challenging and divisive time, and here we are on the eve of the hotly contested and very important mid-term elections. On top of that, we are faced with the question of how best to "love our neighbor"

in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence. Add to that our ongoing response and commitment as a congregation to Jesus' call to follow him along the way he walks, which, as we have heard over and over again today, is the way of love.

Of course, the kind of love Jesus and John and Mark are talking about is *agape*, love in action, walking the talk. As we make decisions about how we will live and walk with the Lord, Jesus' commandment to love God and to love neighbor is the lens through which we make **all** of our decisions about how we will use **all** that we have.

As I end this sermon, I'd like to share with you how Amy Allen sums up "walking in love." She writes, "Acting with *agape* love as our *first* commandment means stepping back from whatever other codes of conduct or moral laws dictate our personal ethics and asking first, *What does this mean for my neighbor?* Or, even more potently, *Is this me giving myself to my neighbor? Is this me giving myself to my God?* Because to put love of God and neighbor first means not just to act according to what we think is best for our neighbor, but rather, to act in such a way that we give our very self to our neighbor — and to let *that* be the foundation upon which everything else is built."⁶

It's all that easy and it's all that hard.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, you told us, "Love the Lord, your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind." Lord, let this be. Show us how. Lord Jesus, you also told us, "And love your neighbor as yourself." Lord, let this be Take us where we surely need to go. Let your love be the power that enlivens our lives, light that points to the path, and the very grace that saves us. Kindly fill us with your love. Amen.

NOTES

¹Amy Lindeman Allen, "The Politics of the Greatest Commandment — Mark 12:28-34," October 26, 2015 at www.politicaltheology.com.

²David Ewart, "Mark 12:28-34," at www.holytextures.com.

³"Love God and Do What You Will," at www.kingsmeadow.com.

⁴The story is told by Jerome in his commentary on Galatians 6:10.

⁵Rev. David F. Sellery, "The Great Lover," at www.us6.campaign-archive.com.

⁶Amy Lindeman Allen.