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All you need is love: FPCAllegan 11/4/2012

Deut. 6:1-9 These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, <sup>2</sup> so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. <sup>3</sup> Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you. <sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup> Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Mark 12:28-34

<sup>28</sup> One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

<sup>29</sup> “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’ <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>32</sup> There is no commandment greater than these.”

<sup>32</sup> “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. <sup>33</sup> To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

<sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

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All kinds of people from all over the world read the Bible. They read it from various perspectives and for all sorts of purposes. Jews read the Bible, Muslims read the Bible and Christians all read the Bible. People read the Bible in order to judge each other, in order to prove a point, but also in order to grow spiritually. --Even Atheists have been known to read the Bible in order to remind themselves what they do not believe in!

But when people read the Bible, they often miss the big point. When reading it, they find that there are a lot of things written in there. There is history, there are songs, there are wise sayings, and there are laws. There are prophecies and apocalypse and even love poetry! When reading the Bible, it is easy to get lost in all of those trees and to miss what is the BIG point of the Bible as expressed in the Old and the New Testaments. I believe that when you summarize the whole of the Bible, when you boil all of it down to its most essential elements, what you find are these two points with a very simple message: 1) God loves us enough to come down to be with us in the form of Jesus. And 2) We are to love God with all that we got and we are to love our neighbors as well as ourselves. Our scripture passage from Mark today is that all important second point, it is our response to God's love. It is no wonder that this

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little passage today is called The Greatest Commandment. --It is not surprising that it is considered the foundation for everything else that the Bible says that we must do. If you can understand this passage today, if you really get it, you, as Jesus says in Mark 12:34 "You are not far from the kingdom of God.

This past Tuesday, I had the opportunity to go to a Jewish / Christian/ Muslim dialogue in Grand Rapids. The conference featured three theologians, one from each faith, each with doctorate degree, who were willing to get together and to dialogue about the topic of, "Living with God in a Time of Suffering." But over the course of the one day conference on suffering, I was surprised to find that all three of the speakers, the Jew, the Christian and the Muslim all three of them returned to the same theme of **love** over and over again. -- I should not have been surprised, since all three of these Abrahamic religions are theologically related, and indeed, even in our scripture today, Jesus is rephrasing Deuteronomy 6 and adding to it as he gives his answer to the question of what is the most important commandment here in Mark 12. --But some of the nuances of what these three learned theologians said about the nature of love was very enlightening, and I think are very informative to our examination of this, the greatest commandment of love today.

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At the conference, my favorite speaker was Dr. Cynthia Campbell, the former president of McCormick Theological Seminary, where I got my Masters of Divinity degree. And of the many things that she said at the conference, Dr. Campbell talked very specifically about how a God of love is a God who is **with us** in our time of pain and suffering. She emphasized that our God is not remote, and that the death of Jesus on the cross is perhaps not best viewed as God dealing out a punishment to Jesus in our place, but rather as God voluntarily suffering the terrible consequences of human sin and disobedience in order to be with us as we suffer in our own lives. From this way of thinking, Jesus dying on the cross was God choosing to be with us in our pain and suffering; a huge demonstration of God's infinite love and grace for us. God suffered with humanity in order demonstrate that nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God. Even the experiences of desertion, torture, pain and an excruciating death are experiences that God willingly shares with us. And God does this because of love. The historian, Arnold Toynbee says:

***“Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word.”*** Because God loves us, God makes the choice to be with us

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in our pain and suffering, because God loves us, God gives us life and a way to be in relationship with God. Because God loves us, there is love and life and good in this world instead of just chaos and death. And because there is love in the world, there is a hope that God's love, ultimately will overcome our human stubborn selfishness and win us over into an eternal relationship with a loving God. This love of God for humanity is what is expressed in the Old Testament as God lived into relationship with the Hebrew people, and it is reflected in our care for our fellow human beings.

The Jewish speaker of the morning was Dr. Donniel Hartman. Dr. Hartman is an orthodox Rabbi, and he is the President of the Shalom Institute in Jerusalem. One of the things that he spoke about in answer to a question was about the theological concept of Tzedakah (Sidackah). While this word is frequently translated as "Charity" into English from Hebrew, and there are boxes set out for donations for the poor called Sidackah boxes, Rabbi Hartman explained that the concept of Sidackah was much bigger than that. He explained that the concept of Sidackah was not simply giving money to someone else out of the feeling of guilt or to be thought of as being or doing good, the concept of Sidackah was that giving

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to someone and caring for them was an act of Justice. --That the money that you were giving to someone was something that was already theirs but that they had experienced unfortunate circumstances and had lost it. That the money that I am giving to you isn't really mine to give out of charity, it simply somehow has come into my possession. This concept of Sidackah is really important in order to get below the surface of the greatest commandment and to really understand it.

If all of the money and all of the resources in this world really can't be owned, if they are simply on loan to one or another of us; then there is a greater sense of shared responsibility for all that we have. If everyone on this earth is not simply just responsible for themselves, but also responsible for the well being of each other, then I think we are getting a sense of the scope of this greatest commandment.

Dr. Omid Safi, the Islamic scholar spoke very movingly about the birth of his daughter. He talked about how when he first held his firstborn child, his perfect daughter, he felt all of the hardness of his heart toward this idea of being a parent simply melting away. He felt an overwhelming urge to protect her and to keep her safe from all of the evil in the world. He felt an intense love unlike anything that he had ever felt before. Later on, when

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his wife was about to give birth to their second child, Dr. Safi remembers that he was worried that perhaps that same feeling of love would not be there for his second born as it had been for his first child. But for his next child, he had the very same experience, and instead of finding that his love for his first born child was divided in half, he found that the amount of his love was doubled. Dr. Safi then went on to say that this experience of the expansion of his heart and the growing of his love must not stop with our biological families. That in order to really love our neighbor as ourselves, that our love must extend to all people who are living outside our false and arbitrary human boundaries of class, country, religion and race. We must get to the point where we can truly say that God is loving and is at the side of all humans, both “our side” and also “their side.”

Dr. Safi went on to say that in order to truly love someone, you need to kill your pity for them. He pointed out that pity is not the same thing as love, that pity for someone who is worse off than you are involves your thinking that you are somehow superior to them and that your care for them is doing them a favor. Rather than thinking that you are superior to someone, it is better to reflect and to have an understanding of how we are all connected to each other.

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Dr. Safi concluded his remarks by pointing out how all of our love for each other is a communal action. Or in other words, how I think about others and how I treat other people in a loving way or an unloving way does not just effect them. Those thoughts and those actions also fundamentally changes who I am and how I exist as well. If I am unmoved by human suffering, then I become less human myself. If I do not love people and simply pity them, then I do not expand my own capacity to love others despite their differences. The love that Jesus is talking about here is the love that hurts when anyone hurts. It is the love that cares about each other because the other is a child of God and is in relationship with God. To love is a commandment to action. It is not simply an emotion with no function. To love your neighbor as yourself is a way of being for all of us who follow Jesus Christ.

So what does all of this mean for us today? The greatest commandment to love your neighbor as well as yourself is the fundamental message of the whole Bible. This love, this connectional commitment to each other does not view ourselves as living in isolation from each other, but views the world as a community, a group; where all of us are caretakers of the resources of this world and each other no matter where

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the other lives and no matter what they believe. The greatest commandment is a call to action; where the love that we feel for our immediate families is stretched and extended out to all peoples in all peoples around the globe, and where our love and treatment of other people is not simply love for their sake, but it is also love and care that defines our own souls, and gives us a purpose to be the people of love that God calls us to be. Amen.

Rev. Karen Fitz La Barge. Copyrighted Material. All Rights Reserved