

Scripture: Mark 12:28-34

Sermon Title: "Love of Neighbor"

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Today, we begin an October journey of exploring together 3 Great Loves – the love of neighbor, the love of children, and the love of creation. Since 2017, our wider church, the United Church of Christ, has been encouraging congregations around the denomination to think about all the ways that they live out these three great loves, in ways that are traditional and long lasting, and in ways that respond to the current needs in a community and in our world, responding to the ever changing landscape around us. In this work, there is also a challenge: to be open to the ways in which God may be calling us to embrace and live these loves more fully. This morning, we take up the first of these as we explore the love of our neighbors.

Now, to help us delve into this more fully today, I want to share with you a story – it is a story from Jewish tradition that has been passed down and I first heard it from Rabbi Jackie Tabick in a talk she gave in 2009 entitled "The Balancing Act of Compassion."

The story goes a little something like this – one sabbath day, there was a man who was relatively well off in this life and he was attending synagogue and as do some folks in a variety of faith traditions, this man found himself dozing off in the middle of the sermon. Now that day, the Rabbi was reading from the book of Leviticus, and the Rabbi was speaking of how, in ancient times, the priest would have bread that they would place on a special table in the temple in Jerusalem. Now, this man, who was in and out of sleep was catching a few words here and there – bread, God, temple, he heard. Then, with a bit of start, he woke up, wide awake, and he said, "God wants bread! That's what God wants!" And he rushed home. That day he baked many loaves of bread and brought them back to the synagogue. He went into the sanctuary and open the ark which is the place where the scrolls of scripture were kept, this central place of focus in the synagogue, and he piled 12 loaves of bread in there for God and he was so happy because he felt that he finally knew what God really wanted! Then he went home.

Later that day, the cleaner came in and he was having a rough day. He came in talking to God, saying, "God, I'm in so much trouble. I have kids to feed. My wife is ill. We don't have much money. I don't know what I'm going to do. God help me" Then he smelled something, something really good! He went to the ark and opened it and saw all the loaves of bread and he exclaimed, "God you answered my prayers!" And he took the bread home that day.

Meanwhile the man who baked the bread was thinking about what he had just done and thought that he was being a bit silly. "Why would God want bread?" he wondered, "God who is ruler of all, God almighty, why would God want his bread?" Feeling rather silly and not wanting someone else to find out just how silly he was being, he rushed back to the synagogue to get the bread before anyone saw what he had done. But, when he got there and the bread was gone, he exclaimed, "God you really did want my bread! Next week, I will bring more! This time, with raisins!" For years this went on. This one man brought bread and put it in the ark and the other found it, rejoiced in how God was providing for his needs in these difficult times, and he took it home.

Well eventually a new rabbi came to serve that synagogue and he realized what was happening. He brought the two men into his office to explain what was going on. The man who was baking all this bread was disheartened, "you mean God didn't really want my bread?" And the other man was saddened too, "you mean God didn't really answer my prayer?" And I bet you can see where this story is going. The rabbi went on and said, "of course God wanted your bread to help live the call to be compassionate. God wanted your bread to be an answer to prayer" And he looked at the other and said, "and God answered your prayers, through the gifts of this man" Then the rabbi took the hands of the one man, hands that had baked so much bread and provided so many meals to his neighbor in need and the rabbi said, "don't you get it, these are the hands of God!"

In our scripture lesson this morning, we hear the words that are so familiar to many – that we are to love God and to love our neighbors. That these are the greatest commandments. That these commands sum up all of what God longed to convey to the people in the Hebrew scriptures. I speak of these greatest commandments often for they are such a central focus in our faith. Still, there is something else offered in the Gospel of Mark today that takes us one step further. The scribe who was asking Jesus about which commandment is first, agreed with him that it is to love God and love neighbor. Then the scribe went on to say, “this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Now, what does that mean? In the Old Testament, many offerings were made to God and burnt offerings stood, in general, as a way of reconciling and renewing one’s relationship with God – that these sacrifices offered some sort of salvation one might even say. And when the scribe says that the acts of loving God and loving neighbor are more important than these, it speaks, I believe, to the saving power of love. That when we love God and love our neighbor, two callings which go hand in hand, when we follow God faithfully and when we care for the needs of those around us with the same fervor that we care for ourselves, when we reach out with tenderness and compassion for one another, we find salvation. We find reconciliation with God. We find a renewed relationship with the Divine. When we used our hands and our hearts to be compassionate and to live love, these are holy moments which draw us so close to God. For when we love our neighbors as we too love our God, our hands become God’s hands and in those moments, there is a oneness, a unity with God.

Beloved People of God, when we love the people who are close by and the people around the world as we love ourselves, when we love these who are our neighbors, our hands a line with God’s hands and our hearts a line with the very essence of God. And in those moments, we are on holy ground, as God’s love comes down yet again to transform the world, one act of love at a time. May we always be willing to do just that. Thanks be to God! Amen.