

Sermon **Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost** Oct. 31st, 2021

Today is one of those days where I am conflicted. Do I preach the lectionary or do I preach the day? In case you do not know, it is Reformation Sunday. Then, in addition to that, it is a fifth Sunday, today is also a healing service; thus, I have three different avenues that I could choose from.

This past week, I had Fall Theological Conference and I spent 48 hours up in Egg Harbor and in-between the worship services and the workshops I was contemplating on the direction that I would go with my sermon.

I was leaning into the Gospel text.

I almost got swayed to preach the day when on Wednesday night many of the confirmation students had a deer in the headlight look when I asked questions about Reformation Sunday.

But, in the end, I decided that I needed to preach on the Gospel text that was chosen for the day. In particular; there were seven words that gripped me and I wanted to explore them more.

Here are the seven words:

*“Not far from the Kingdom of God”*

Before I dive into the seven words, I feel that I need to step back and share with you what is occurring and what has led us to this moment in the story that we heard and why these seven words were shared.

Last week, we finished up Mark 10 and now we are in Chapter 12 and in verse 28. Thus, we have skipped a big section. In the section that we missed, we have missed four important stories.

The stories that we missed include:

- Jesus charging the temple leadership with corrupting the temple
- Jesus has numerous debates with authorities and wins them all
- Jesus tells parables that indict the priest, scribes and elders as murders of God’s prophets
- Jesus challenges the way that the Sadducees interpret the scriptures

These are the reasons that the chiefs and scribes are plotting to kill him. So, today, we get a reprieve. The interaction is positive amidst the conflict-ridden stories that Mark has been sharing.

The scribe comes to Jesus with a serious question and the question is one that is sincere and it is not a set-up question. Jesus has surely endured enough of those.

Here is the question:

*“Which is most important of all the commandments?”*

Jesus leans into two very important sacred texts from the Old Testament. The first one being from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and the next one being from Leviticus 19:18.

Now, remember or learn for the first time that the Deuteronomy text is part of the Shema and is the cornerstone of the Jewish faith that they recite twice a day. The Leviticus text designated a fellow member of the Israelite community.

So, when Jesus uses these two texts together; he is placing himself in the rich tradition of the biblical scholars. These text give the answer to the scribe.

Love God - Love Neighbor

Now, the love that Jesus is speaking of is not simply sentiment but it is meant to embody action.

I want you to take a small breath because here is where a hard lip bighting moment can occur. The two being intertwined means that if we do not love our neighbor; it nullifies our love for God.

Mark then expands the love of others and love of neighbors to include persons outside of the Israelite community. It continues for us today. The love of others extends to everyone.

Here is where we are today. Because of Mark; the Gospel traditions challenges us to think broadly about whom we are to love as our neighbor.

Leviticus is a book that we often avoid. However, when Jesus used the words to the scribe, the scribe would have known exactly where Jesus was going and why he used those words.

For you see, in Leviticus, loving your neighbor as yourself means not exploiting the less powerful or the stranger. It means feeding those who are hungry, protecting those who are vulnerable and caring for those who are not privileged.

In the end, it means opening our eyes to the signs of need that are all around us. This is part of the reason that I color outside of the lines when I am choosing the liturgies. The call to worship, the prayers and confessions are trying to help us open our eyes and connect us to our faithful living.

With all of that, the scribe is stuck and we are stuck. Hear the seven words again:

*“not far from the Kingdom of God”*

Many of us would probably be more comfortable in our general agreement with him than following him to the cross.

Theodore Wardlaw gives the following examples and I will admit that when I read them, they caused me to look down at the ground and not towards the cross.

We would rather talk theology with Jesus over a latte than spend the evening massaging his blistered feet in a shelter. We might prefer writing him a check than serving in a soup kitchen. We would gladly have all the right instincts about “the homeless”, “the immigrants”, and “those in prison” than know any of their names or hear any of their stories.

On Friday, Stacey and I was showing my parents around Door County and as we were driving, we had K-Love on. One of my favorite songs came on that is about this text.

The chorus has the following words:

*Gotta keep it real simple, keep it real simple  
ground zero*

*Bring everything right back to*

*'Cause it all comes down to this*

*Love God and love people*

*We're living in a world that keeps breakin'*

*But if we want to find a way to change it*

*It all comes down to this - Love God and love people*

I am going to share a story with you that I have suppressed much of the last 10 years of my life. In 2011, we were living in a suburb of Indianapolis. The church was in a very affluent community. The church that I was serving stated they had a high regard for mission and serving; this was very attractive to me.

I found multiple ways to connect the youth and the adults to serving in the inner city of Indianapolis. We participated in a ministry called Meet Me Under the Bridge where we fed the homeless under the bridge.

We participated in the Men’s and the Women’s homeless shelters where we served meals, played with the kids and loaded up our projectors and did movie nights for them. We then also connected with a ELCA congregation in the inner-city and began some hard relationship work with those who were “the others”.

Let me just say that over all, many of those initiatives were not well received. They pushed people a little too far out of their comfortable zone; they were not yet ready for that step.

There is a question that can be asked that goes like this:

*“How do we know that the night is over and that the dawn is coming?”*

The answer is the following: *“It is when you can look into the face of a stranger and see a member of your family”*

I have pushed my time limit, once again. However, I feel compelled to conclude my sermon with words from Barbara Brown Taylor. She is sharing about the bible and the inner conflict of using the bible as a weapon versus living it out.

*I can begin to mistake the words on the page for the realities they describe. I can begin to love the dried ink marks on the page more than I love the encounters that gave rise to them. If I am not careful, I can decide that I am really much happier reading my bible than I am entering into what God is doing in my own time and place, since shutting the book to go outside will involve the great risk of taking part in the stories that are still taking shape. Neither I, nor anyone else knows how these stories will turn out, since at this point they involve more blood than ink. The whole purpose of the Bible, it seems to me, is to convince people to set the words down to become living words in the world for God's sake.*

May we have the courage to go out and let the ink become blood. **Amen.**