

Sermon (revised)  
31 October 2021  
Mark 12:28-31  
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One Question. Two Answers.

From today's Gospel, Jesus says:

"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."

Jesus also says:

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

These two statements from Jesus are a response to a deep question posed from a religious official. A scribe asks, "which commandment is the first of all?"

I find Jesus' response to the question incredibly interesting – and almost comical.

Jesus replies from the Hebrew scripture – the one Chuck read this morning from Deuteronomy (*Deut. 6:4-5*), - "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."

But then Jesus offers a freebie...a bonus commandment.

Jesus adds, "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Again, Jesus is quoting Old Testament scripture, this time from Leviticus. (*Lev. 19:18*)

I wonder if the scribe thought, "Well, thanks for the two-fer, Jesus. But I really only asked about the FIRST commandment. Why did you throw in that second one?"

I wonder about that, too. The question is specific about the first commandant. In any list there can only be one "first." And commandment is clearly singular.

Why did Jesus give two answers to a single question? Why Jesus? Why?

Father Christopher, Mother Sylvia, and I discussed this at our weekly Bible study on Wednesday. And here's what we came up with:

The second commandment is how you accomplish the first commandment. By loving your neighbor as yourself, you therefore love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength.

As Emerson Powery, professor of Biblical studies at Messiah College in Pennsylvania puts it **“love for the other elucidates most clearly one’s love for God.”**

The second commandment (love your neighbor) is how you accomplish the first commandment (love God).

Jesus is helpful like that. He tells us to love God...and before we can ask how, Jesus tells us how. Jesus says “love your neighbor.”

“Love your neighbor.”

In his conclusion, Jesus mixes up some noun verb agreement, I believe. Jesus says, “There IS no other COMMANDMENT greater than THESE.”

Shouldn’t it be “There ARE no other COMMANDMENTS greater than THESE”?

Or

“There IS no other COMMANDMENT greater than THIS.”?

But Jesus says “There is no other COMMANDMENT (singular) greater than THESE (plural.)

Perhaps Jesus is acknowledging he’d given two commandments, but that they are really one and the same. There is one question but there are two answers. By loving your neighbor, you are loving God.

This same encounter between the religious leader and Jesus appears in all three synoptic gospels. Each one is told in a slightly different manner. But the messages is always the same. Love God. Love your neighbor.

At the end of Luke’s narrative (*Luke 10:25-37*), the person posing the question asks who exactly their neighbor might be. Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan. It’s a morality tale of thinking someone who we believe is NOT our neighbor turns out to be the best neighbor of all.

What about us? How do we propose to love our neighbor as ourselves to therefore love God?

Jesus gave us the commandment. It is up to us to figure out how to do it.

I have no story as profound as the parable of the Good Samaritan, but I do have an illustration from something I was given online.

It was a meme shared by someone who is upset about the state of the world. I’ll warn you; I find what I’m about to read to be vile and hateful. But it’s an example of how NOT to love your neighbor.

Mind you, it was not written directly to or at me. It is a writing shared by many angry and scared people who do not like things to change.

It reads, quote:

*You know, folks. I never cared that you were gay until you started shoving it down my throat.*

*I never cared what color you were until you started blaming me for your problems.*

*I never cared about your political affiliation until you started condemning mine.*

*I never cared where you were born until you wanted to erase my history and blame my ancestors*

*I didn't care if your beliefs were different than mine until you said my beliefs were wrong.*

*But now I care. My patience and tolerance are gone.*

End Quote

The person who shared these horrible words with me used to like me – a lot. They tell me they are loving their neighbors as themselves, but I don't see how that is possible.

You can't be someone's neighbor – you can't love your neighbor as yourself – and never care about them.

The very structure of their copied words speaks volumes about how little they love their neighbors. They didn't care anything about their neighbors who are different than themselves – didn't give them a second thought - until they felt threatened by those neighbors' very existence.

Instead of saying "*I never cared that you were gay until you started shoving it down my throat.*", a true, loving neighbor would say "I care about you deeply. Tell me, my queer friend, how you are not being heard."

Instead of saying "*I never cared what color you were until you started blaming me for your problems.*", a true, loving neighbor would say "I love you. I honor and respect you. How can I help fight the oppression you encounter because of your skin color?"

If we love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, we couldn't say, "*I never cared about your political affiliation until you started condemning mine*" but rather, "I see we are very far apart on how we view the world. Can we talk about ways to meet in the middle?"

A true neighbor would not say "*I never cared where you were born until you wanted to erase my history and blame my ancestors.*" If we love our neighbor as ourselves, we'd acknowledge the mistreatment of immigrants. We'd see the face of God in each person who comes to us seeking help and we would extend all our heart and soul and mind and strength to help people born

somewhere different than we were. A loving neighbor also knows history cannot be erased. The worst – and best – of history is always with us.

And instead of saying, *“I didn’t care if your beliefs were different than mine until you said my beliefs were wrong.”* Someone who loves their neighbor would say “We don’t see eye to eye on a lot of topics, but let’s have a conversation and see if there isn’t some common ground for us to talk about.”

A true loving neighbor doesn’t get angry when someone is different or speaks up about something bothering them.

Loving your neighbor doesn’t mean you simply tolerate their existence as long as they keep away from you.

Loving your neighbor does mean you stop worrying about how they might affect your life.

Loving your neighbor means some hard work and rolling up your sleeves to get things done.

Loving your neighbor as yourself means having difficult conversations.

Loving your neighbor may mean you will offend people who are only looking out for themselves.

A loving neighbor always cares – truly cares – about other people – cares about all people.

Someone who truly loves God throws all their heart and soul and mind and strength into loving their neighbor.

And there is no need to talk about who is our neighbor and who isn’t our neighbor. News Flash! Everyone is our neighbor.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that by loving everyone in this great big world with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, we are also loving God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength.

What’s the first commandment?

1. Love God.
2. Love our neighbor

By following #2, we are truly following #1.

One Question. Two Answers.

Loving our neighbor is the way we love God.

Actually, it’s just one answer.