

*Giving For Love*  
Mark 12.28-34  
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## **Introduction**

As a sign of the times and how much they've changed, for some reason I remembered last week a youth group meeting when I was in high school. I remember there was a talk about interfaith dating which might lead, of course, to interfaith marriage. This seemed relevant to me at the time because while the first girl I dated seriously was Presbyterian, the second girl I dated seriously was Lutheran. The third girl I dated seriously, the one I married, was Episcopalian, and that's how the subject was discussed back in those days. Interfaith relationships were discussed in terms of dating or marrying outside of one's denomination. The notion of marrying a non-Christian wasn't even on the radar scope, at least not at the church where I grew up.

How times have changed. Differences between denominations seem trivial today if the subject even comes up. But given today's geopolitical realities, conflicting religious viewpoints are the daily subject of newspaper headlines and television shows and, of course, the conflict isn't new. It even echoes even in the familiar words of my text from Mark's Gospel about the greatest commandments.

We're going to work today in Mark but Matthew's Gospel also tells the same story and sets it within a series of conflicts Jesus had with the authorities a few days before he was crucified. Luke also tells the story but places it earlier in Jesus' ministry when a religious leader wanted to know how to receive eternal life. Jesus asked him what the scriptures taught and the man replied, "Love God and love the neighbor." Jesus said, "That's right. Go do it." But the man asked, "who's my neighbor?" which led Jesus to talk about the Good Samaritan.

Mark also sets the story during the few days before Jesus was arrested. But unlike Matthew and even unlike Luke, Mark tells the story with an interesting difference. In Mark's version, a scribe, that is, someone who was expert in the scriptures, overhears Jesus arguing with other religious leaders. The scribe asks Jesus a question and compliments him on his answer. Jesus returns the compliment. Mark has 19 references to scribes. This one alone is positive and that points us in a very important direction. Let's read it in Mark 12.

### Mark 12.28-34 (NRSV)

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to

him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ — this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

### **ONE: The dilemma of external religion**

As we reflect on this text today, let me organize our thinking around two points, the first of which is the dilemma of external religion. For believers, externalized religion poses a major dilemma.

Were we to take the three versions of this story from Matthew, Mark, and Luke and set them in columns side by side, you would notice both similarities and differences. The major similarity is that each version points back to the same Old Testament verses. For the standard teaching of the rabbis said that our full religious and moral duty was expressed in just two verses, one from Deuteronomy — “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (6.5) — and one from Leviticus — “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19.18).<sup>1</sup> Jesus wasn’t teaching anything new and Matthew, Mark, and Luke all show that.<sup>2</sup>

But Mark’s version differs because he alone has the scribe say to Jesus that love of God and love of neighbor are more important than “all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Remember, this conversation was happening in the temple where just a few yards away the sacrifices before Passover were taking place. The sacrificial system was both symbol and reality of external religious duty. Now Judaism never officially taught that external religious duty was more important than love of God or neighbor.<sup>3</sup> But

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 6.4-5: Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Leviticus 19.18: You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

<sup>2</sup> Even though he was in dispute with Jewish leaders, Jesus taught, claimed, and affirmed the essential tenets of the Jewish tradition which was, after all, his own tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Many Old Testament make the point that external religion is not the ultimate form of obedience. For example: 1 Samuel 15.22: And Samuel said, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. Hosea 6.6: For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. Micah 6.6-8: “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Craddock, et al., state: “Too often Christians forget this, creating generalized and largely false dichotomies between law and gospel, work and faith, act and motive.” Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B After Pentecost* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985) 239.

external religious duty can be seen and measured and that's the dilemma. We say we should love God above all. But how do we show that? By loving neighbor perhaps? Okay, but who is my neighbor? How do we know when we're doing the right thing or enough of the right thing? It's one thing if I can show my love of God by sacrificing a lamb or a couple of doves. Then I know what to do. But without something external and tangible, then it's much harder to know if we're doing the right thing.<sup>4</sup>

This is far from just being a problem in Bible times when sacrifice was the chief form of external religion. It's a very real problem today and no one feels it more acutely than ministers. Because whether we like it or not, whether we admit it or not, whether you realize it consciously or not, the truth is that we are largely judged and we tend to judge ourselves on the basis of external religion. How big is your church? How many people come to worship? What's your budget? What's your salary? These are all external things and they are how churches are judged and how ministers are judged.

The dilemma of external religion is the minister's primary dilemma because we are charged with the institutional health of a congregation. We determine that health by money, attendance, and growth, all of which are external things. We could even call them rituals, the things we go through as church people. And clergy are essentially judged on whether the ritualistic side of the church is good. In two weeks we'll make our financial pledges for next year. If the amount is good, we'll all be happy. If it's not good, then there will be negative assessments of what's going on here.

The text is teaching that while the ritual and external are important, they are not ultimate. Love of God and love of the neighbor are the ultimate things. Are we doing that? Maybe our coming to church is loving God. Maybe it's even a pathway to loving others. But maybe not. Maybe it's just ritual. Maybe our giving is sufficient for the love of God and love of neighbor. Or maybe it's just a form of religious ritual? Not unimportant but still not ultimate. How do we know? That's the dilemma of external religion. It's important and even necessary. But it's not ultimate.

## **TWO: We are called by a particular God to be a particular kind of people**

The only way through the dilemma is to affirm that we are called by a particular God to be a particular kind of people. That's my second point and let's work with it for a moment.

I mentioned that one of differences in Mark's version of the text was Jesus' positive assessment of the scribe. Jesus said he wasn't far from the kingdom of God. A second distinctive in Mark's version is that Jesus quotes two verses from Deuteronomy. He quotes the verse that we should love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. (Deuteronomy 6.5) But unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark also has Jesus quote the verse

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<sup>4</sup> "One might even argue that there is a relativizing of religion here, at least a relativizing of its trappings, ceremonies, and rites. At times they assume what seems like an inordinate amount of time and energy and money, but are set in a penultimate position by the great commandments." Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching, Year B* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 574.

just before: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

In other words, the call to love isn't a call from just any old god to any old people. This is not a call from a god who is a ruthless tyrant or a genial Santa Claus who expects just every Tom, Dick, and Harry or Jane, Sue, and Mary to obey.<sup>5</sup> This is a call from a particular God to a particular people. It is a call from the God of Israel who is the God of Jesus to a people who are claimed by that call as Christians. In other words, this call says who God is and who we are. When we know who God is and we know who we are we care close to knowing what to do.

I mentioned last Sunday Dr. Fred Craddock, one of the great preachers of our time. He was invited one year to give two lectures in mid-October at the University of Winnipeg in Canada. As they were leaving the lecture hall after the first lecture on Friday night, it was beginning to spit a little snow. Fred was surprised as was his host who had assured Fred before he came that it was too early for cold weather. “Just bring a little windbreaker, a little light jacket,” was the advice.

Saturday morning there was two to three feet of snow pressed against the motel door. The phone rang and the host told Fred, “We're all surprised by this. In fact, I can't come and get you to take you to any breakfast. The lecture this morning has been canceled and the airport is closed. If you can make your way down the block and around the corner, there is a little depot, a bus depot, and it has a café. I'm sorry.”

Fred put on that little light jacket; it was nothing. He got his little cap and put it on; it didn't even help him in the room. He went into the bathroom and unrolled long sheets of toilet paper and made a nest in the cap so that it would protect his bald head against the icy wind and then he went outside. The wind was cold, the snow was deep. He slid and bumped and finally made it around the corner into the bus station. Every stranded traveler in western Canada was in there, strangers to each other, pressing and pushing and loud.

Fred finally found a place to sit and after a lengthy time a man in a greasy apron came over and said, “What'll you have?”

“May I see a menu?”

“What do you want a menu for? We have soup.”

“What kinds of soup do you have?”

And he said, “Soup. You want some soup?”

Fred said, “That was what I was going to order — soup.”

Awhile later the soup came and Fred put a spoon to it. Yuck! It was the awful. It was kind of gray looking; it was so bad he couldn't eat it, but he sat there and put his hands about it. It was warm, and so he sat there with his head down, his head wrapped in toilet paper, bemoaning his sad state and the horrible soup. But it was warm, so he clutched it and stayed bent over his soup stove.

The door opened again. The wind was icy, and somebody yelled, “Close the door!” In came this woman clutching her little coat. She found a place, not far from Fred. The

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<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, 573-574.

greasy apron came, “What do you want?”

She said, “Glass of water.” He brought a glass of water, took out his tablet, and said, “Now what’ll you have?”

She said, “Just the water.”

He said, “You have to order, lady.”

“Well, I just want a glass of water.”

“Look, I have customers that pay — what do you think this is, a church or something? Now what do you want?”

She said, “Just a glass of water and some time to get warm.”

“Look, there are people that are paying here. If you’re not going to order, you’ve got to leave!” And he got real loud about it.

So she got up to leave and, almost as if rehearsed, everybody in that little café stood up and started toward the door. Fred also got up and said, “I’m voting for her.”

And the man in the greasy apron said, “All right, all right, all right, she can stay.” Everybody sat down, and he brought her a bowl of soup.

Fred asked the guy next to him, “Who is she?”

He said, “I never saw her before.” The place grew quiet, but Fred heard the sipping of that awful soup. He said to himself, “I’m going to try that again,” and he put his spoon to the soup. He thought, *You know, it’s not bad soup. Everybody is eating this soup. I’ll eat the soup. It’s pretty good soup.*

Dr. Craddock said later he had no idea what kind of soup it was. He didn’t know what was in it, but he recalled when he was eating it, it tasted a little bit like bread and wine. Just a little like bread and wine.<sup>6</sup>

On a miserable snowy morning in Winnipeg in a forgettable bus depot café with people he didn’t know and would never see again, Fred Craddock tasted the sacrament in some awful soup. He tasted the sacrament because he knew he was called by a particular God to be a particular kind of person. And the person who truly loves God and truly loves the neighbor will see the presence of God not just in external religion but in every moment of every day.

## Conclusion

So the question is what is happening here right now? There are lots of conflicting views of religion and its importance. The question is whether there is more happening here than ritual. If our worship is just a little exercise in external religion, then there is a point to it but not a great point. If, however, our worship is a window or even better, a doorway to God’s greater world, if through worship and all that comes from it like our giving, we inch closer to loving God and loving neighbor, if the real taste of bread and wine today quickens in our souls greater and deeper love, then we are close, indeed *very close*, to the Kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup> May it be so with us.

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<sup>6</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, eds., (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) 83-84.

<sup>7</sup> Certainly this pronouncement in the text underscores Jesus’ authority. For “who but God alone

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actually knows the location of the Kingdom and the proximity of any human to it?” Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B After Pentecost 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 121.