

Faith Mennonite Church
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Things that make for peace

Loving God and Neighbor: It's a Package Deal
Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37

As Christians the beginning of any peacemaking work that we do is a grounding in God's love. Someone has said "Love is not a thing you do or come to. It comes to you, overcomes you...where faith meets hope, love is born" (H.H. Kelly). This, indeed, is the biblical message: that God freely and generously loves her people; that she lavishly pours out her care and compassion for sinful humanity. We do not earn this love; we cannot manipulate this love. We simply receive it and then act in kind. (C.S. Mann, *Anchor Bible Commentary on Mark*).

This seems straightforward and so it was for the scribe who approached Jesus in the account from the Gospel of Mark. The scribe, someone concerned with written records and contracts, had been listening to other leaders challenging Jesus over things such as payment of taxes and life after death. He was impressed with Jesus' answers and so he posed a question, not for debate, but to get to the heart of the matter. "Which commandment is first of all? What's most important for us to be doing?"

Jesus replied from two sections of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, well known to all Jewish men. From the book of Deuteronomy he quoted: "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." Then quoting from the book of Leviticus, he continued: "The second is 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

The words from Deuteronomy are known as the Shema and these were prayed by Jewish men two times a day. Jesus took the liberty to change the words slightly, by adding "all your mind." Perhaps he did this in deference to people listening in who were influenced by Greek culture. In Hebrew thinking the concept of "heart" encapsulates the mind, will, understanding and memory. But in Greek thought heart and mind are understood as separate entities. Heart is the center of passion, appetite, and desire, while mind holds understanding, reason and thought. (Chris Bowman, *The Things that Make for Peace*).

Whatever the case, the scribe is satisfied and he affirms that this joint commandment – loving God and loving neighbor as oneself—are more important than ceremonial activities such as sacrifice and offerings. He seems to understand that God is not pleased with worship unless it leads to the actions of a loving God – love toward other people.

Luke records another account around this same teaching, but with a very different twist. We don't know if Jesus had two separate encounters around this subject, or whether Mark and Luke took a common story and reshaped it in two different ways for different teaching purposes.

Whatever the case, Luke's encounter is less friendly. Unlike Mark's scribe who seems to question Jesus out of a genuine desire to clarify a truth he can follow, Luke places a lawyer in the story who comes to test Jesus. Mark's scribe asks the big question: what's the most important commandment? What is the most important thing we should be doing in this life? Luke's lawyer seems to be looking for just the opposite – how much (or little!) do I have to do to be guaranteed eternal life. The professor and teachers in our midst will recognize this question and questioner as the student who asks at the beginning of the semester: What do I have to do to earn an A or a B? Rather than asking, What all can I possibly learn about this topic during this semester and what methods will help me to learn the most? the student is basically looking for a grade—not the learning experience.

This fact is borne out all the more when, after being commended by Jesus for giving the right answer—loving God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind, and his neighbor as himself—the lawyer proceeds with another question, trying to get Jesus to bring the hoop a little lower, “But who is my neighbor?”

Jesus, the master teacher that he was, didn't get trapped by the question. Jesus knew that, if we follow the first and greatest commandment, the question of who constitutes the neighbor becomes irrelevant. This is not about whom do I love, but how does God love? It is not about who deserves to be my neighbor but how do I act neighborly? And the answer is mercy. God's love toward us is merciful, coming to us when we least expect and deserve it. And we should love in the same way, not because others deserve our love but because God's love calls and enables us to act with mercy toward others. The Samaritan was a neighbor to the victim on the road because he acted mercifully toward him.

The Mark and Luke accounts have an interesting connection. You'll recall that the scribe in Mark says that following the commandment to love God and neighbor is more important than burnt sacrifices and offerings. Part of the likely reason that the priest and Levite in the Luke account by-passed the battered man was that, if he were dead and they were to touch him, they would be ceremonially unclean and unable to take part in their religious obligations. This might seem petty to us who can't fully appreciate the demands of a rigorous religious system. But if we stop and examine our lives we will no doubt find the defense mechanisms we unknowingly create and the social barriers that the very design of our cities construct to shield us from individuals and whole neighborhoods who, like the victim on the road to Jericho, are in need of a neighbor to lend a hand.

On the other hand, the explosion of information sources via the internet, and the globalized economy we now live in, in which we wear clothes made in China, eat fruit grown in Mexico and Chile, and receive tech service from callers in India, make the definition of “neighborhood” larger than the scribe or lawyer would ever have imagined. As we become aware of situations of injustice and suffering around the world, it is tempting to return to the question, “And who is my neighbor?” Can I really be neighborly to everyone in need?

This is the lifelong challenge of the followers of Jesus, and of peacemakers. On the one hand there's no one and no situation that exists outside of the bounds of God's love. On the other hand we are finite creatures with limitations. We cannot respond to *all* of the needs even within our own neighborhoods or this metro area. Our current situation calls for discernment that couples the biblical call with the reality of our current lives. We must remember that our first call is to be merciful as God is merciful, keeping an open and generous heart toward the needs around us. But we will need to make choices among the many needs. For this we should discern what gifts and what passions God has given us and then focus on situations to which we bring some expertise as well as genuine care. We will do most to create peace when, as Frederick Buechner wrote: "our deep gladness meets the world's deep needs."

This is the spirit of the greatest commandment. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.

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