

Faith Mennonite Church
July 29, 2012
Seek Peace & Pursue It
Hermann Weinlick

One God
Mark 12:28-34

Perhaps we should outlaw fire. It destroys homes. It destroys natural habitat. It has always been a part of war, from strange and sadistic story in Judges 15—of Samson catching foxes, tying their tails together, setting their tails on fire, and setting them loose in the grain fields of the Philistines—to Hiroshima and Nagasaki and napalm in the twentieth century.

Many contemporary nonbelievers suggest that we should do away with religion—especially monotheism, belief in one God, because, they reason, belief in one God inevitably leads to seeing things in black-and-white terms, seeing friends and enemies, desiring to destroy the nonbeliever, the enemy. Early Anabaptists may have some sympathy with this, but tend to lay the blame on the yoking of religion with political and military power. Would we be better off if we did not believe in one God of all creation and all people?

In today's Gospel story, Jesus is asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" We tend to be wary of commandments, so we might prefer to word the question, "What does God expect of us?" Micah, one of the prophets of our Old Testament, the Bible that Jesus knew and used, asked a similar question, "What does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the so-called Synoptic Gospels, all tell this story. Luke uses the story as the setting for Jesus telling one of his most familiar parables, the Good Samaritan. Mark differs from Matthew and Luke in how Jesus starts his answer. He starts, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God is one." This is the start of the Shema, from the Hebrew first word, "hear." This starts the passage from Deuteronomy that is at the heart of Jewish piety and is said daily by a faithful Jew. It is the main text printed in very small letters and enclosed in a mezuzah, which faithful Jews place on the doorframes of rooms in their homes. Mezuzah is the Hebrew word for "doorpost."

William Willimon says this about the Shema: "Think of church and synagogue as places where we come to receive training in ridding ourselves of our natural inclination toward polytheism. Every Sunday, we Christians, as honorary, adopted Jews, gather in church and learn again to monotheize. Polytheism is a hard habit to break. Our innate inclination is to divide the world into *our* god as opposed to all of *their* gods, the nice little spiritual god of Sunday morning as opposed to the really important gods who reign Monday through Saturday. . . . Hear, O church, our lives need not be jerked around by presumptive godlets: Eros, Mars, Mammon, Nation."

Jesus sees this statement of faith, "The LORD is one," not as the root of war, but the root of peace and the key to pursuing peace. It is a powerful, simple statement of the unity of creation and the unity of humanity. Jesus follows this statement with two short quotes from his Bible—and ours—from the book of Leviticus, more often quoted for other reasons: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul and strength," and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

How do we love God? How can we love God? The start and heart of this is thankfulness, gratitude, for life. My day usually starts with taking our dog for a walk of a half mile or more, during which I remind myself, "This is the day that the LORD has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24).

One way we love God is by our prayers. For me, a central purpose of prayer is to be reminded of the things that are important to God. If our prayers are only for ourselves, we are lying, because God is concerned about more than us. In fact, the most important part of our prayers is probably praying for our

enemies, who are concerns of God as surely as we are. I keep a list of things I pray for which I use many days, not all in prayer. On that list I star the people and situation that involve hostility or friction. I can say that recently I could erase one star because I was able to spend a good deal of time with one of my “enemies.”

For another thought on loving God, hear a poem by Mary Oliver, “Praying”:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Scholars tell us that the meaning of this in Leviticus was clearly “You shall love your fellow Israelite, your fellow Jew.” This may explain why in Luke this is followed by the parable of the Good Samaritan, told by Jesus to raise the question of “Who is my neighbor?” Commentators of recent decades have tended to focus on the phrase “as yourself” and said more about loving oneself than about loving one's neighbor. But the writers of the times when the Bible was written probably did not think much about self-esteem. They were, rather, asking, “What does God think of me? How do I stand in the eyes of God?” That sounds a little abstract to us, but I think it is an important perspective, because it is something that no person or government can take away from a person. So the U.S. Declaration of Independence says that “we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights,” among them “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” I have always wondered about that phrase and was pleasantly surprised reading the lead article in the June *Atlantic Monthly* in which the writer expressed thanks that the Declaration did not read “life, liberty, and pursuit of wealth.”

A story comes from Europe during World War 2, of Nazi sympathizers, planning to throw a Jewish woman into a well to die, being stopped by the simple statement of a fellow villager, “She's not a dog.” Of course that raises questions about how we treat other animals, but it also shows that often we have more power to influence that we might imagine.

I was recently in conversation with some Lutheran pastors about their denomination's policy of now ordaining gay and lesbian persons for ministry. For some reason several who agreed with the present policy were hesitant to say that those who opposed it were wrong; they just felt uncomfortable talking of being right and others being wrong. I said that I believed the problem was not calling other people wrong, but thinking that differences on this issue should keep us from working together on other matters and letting difference here define our relationship. We have more in common than we think.

I honestly don't remember a lot of sermons in much detail, but I do remember one I heard in the summer of 1962, almost exactly fifty years ago, near the end of a Princeton Seminary singing tour of Central America and Colombia. My rudimentary Spanish was enough for me to understand the main point of the preacher, the head of the Mexican Bible Society. He said that his understanding of the Hebrew of the text “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” was “You shall love your neighbor. He or she is like you.”

May the love for God and neighbor that is in us be a fire that warms a cold world. Amen.