

## **FIRST THINGS**

Mark 12:28-34

It was a fairly peaceful rally at the state capital, filled with a variety of people, many of them young for this is a university town as well. She wore her traditional hijab, he a popular red cap with white lettering. People behind him ignited lighters and tried to light his shirt on fire. Then another “snatched [his] hat off [his] head. She recalls “And that’s when something kind of snapped inside of me because I wear a Muslim hijab, and I’ve been in situations where people have tried to snatch it off my head. And I rushed toward [him] and I just started screaming ‘Leave him alone! Give me that back!’” He reflected later: “I didn’t think we could be any further apart as people, and yet, it was just kinda like this common ‘that’s not OK’ moment. [ Jenkins, Cameron, Kelly Moffit, “An unlikely pair shared a moment that goes beyond politics”, NPR, StoryCorps, September 28, 2018] She was not successful in retrieving his hat. As they now stand side by side, their testimony [is] offered to “encourage other people to engage in more conversation with people [with whom] you may not agree.

“That’s not ok” may express a red line in the sand, a boundary that must not be crossed. As in this case, often such lines are a result of personal experience and represent a resistance to activity that is counted to be harmful. The first thing may be that whatever occurs must be “okay,” although such a judgment is highly individual. What is okay for one may not be for another.

Mark records several conversations between Jesus and others there in the Temple in Jerusalem, a much longer account than any other gospel presents. There is dialogue about political loyalty and the idea of resurrection and then about the Torah. Without any intent to trap Jesus, a scribe who is well-versed in holy scripture asks:”Which commandment is first of all?” Jesus answer quickly and plainly, referring to the law with which the scribe is very familiar. Jesus quotes one passage and then another, yoking the two together in a greater first commandment: “Love God, love neighbor, love self,” a combination of perspective and behavior. The encounter continues with the agreement of the scribe and ends with a curious proclamation of Jesus: “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” The scribe might have been more comforted if Jesus had affirmed his understanding of scripture but Jesus wishes to challenge this scribe to move beyond well-known words to well-formed activity.

First things are important in matters of faith. “In the beginning, God created...” leads us through the Torah and into all of Holy Scripture. John’s gospel starts with “In the beginning the Word was with God...”, describing the relationship between God and Christ. Though many thought the most important of the Ten Commandments was “To honor father and mother,” the first of these ten remains “You shall have no other gods before me.” First people also became important in the ecology of faith. Adam is created first, representing the dominance of men, Abraham is first to enter into covenant with God, a relationship that continues through several religions, David is first illustrating the power of the king even to do evil, Peter is first, determining his leadership in the long line of disciples.

Within this first combined commandment, there is only one verb, a word more often perceived to be more an emotion, a feeling more than active behavior. First we are called to love God and neighbor and self. All other activities are to flow from this love that is directed toward the other with little consideration for self.

The first thing for many is to survive. If this is so, fear plays a dominant role in every response whether it be fight or flight. But we are called to live faithfully and the first thing in such living is to love, building up courage to choose neither fight nor flight but engagement. We love so that we can listen. We listen so that we can learn. And in learning, we come to love more deeply. The wisdom of Jesus is contained within this ongoing rhythm. It is a holy rhythm that creates peace, even between one who wears a head scarf and another who sports a red cap.

On the first day of the week, the first thing that the women did long ago in Jerusalem was to go at dawn to care for Jesus. They were the first to learn of resurrection. Since that time, remembering that event, the church as its first thing in the week has come together on the sabbath to praise God and learn to follow Christ. For some, no food is eaten until after worship; it is a fasting intended to focus attention on God and loving this God.

We come today to the table to enjoy bread and juice, sufficient for us to love God and neighbor, recognizing that we will cannot love our neighbor if we do not love God and we cannot fully love God until we love our neighbor as well. It is a truth of faith that fired the imagination and sustained the faith of those whose lives we remember today. Thanks be to God. Amen.