

Called to Love
Mark 12:28-34
John Breon

Valentine's Day is this week. It makes me think of little chalk candy hearts. It stirs memories of elementary school and handing out valentines to the class. As adults, it means a trip to the store to pick out a card. It may involve a nice dinner out.

It's actually *Saint* Valentine's Day. In churches that observe saints' days, February 14 is remembered as the day of Valentine's martyrdom. He was killed because he refused to stop promoting Christian faith. Some church histories mention possibly three saints named Valentine who were martyrs. The most popular accounts speak of one who was a priest in Rome. He's said to have healed a judge's blind daughter. Another story tells that St. Valentine was imprisoned for marrying Christian couples and aiding Christians being persecuted by Emperor Claudius in Rome. Both acts were considered serious crimes. When he refused to renounce Christian faith, he was beheaded on February 14, probably in the year 269.

The popular customs associated with Saint Valentine's Day likely started with a common belief in England and France during the Middle Ages that on February 14, half way through the second month of the year, the birds began to pair. So the day was seen as specially consecrated to lovers and as a proper occasion for writing love letters and sending lovers' tokens. Those who chose each other under these circumstances seem to have called each other their Valentines

(<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15254a.htm>;
http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=159; both accessed 2/8/17).

So around this week we tend to think about love. And there are all kinds of ideas about love that come from songs and movies and books and magazines. We use the word love to talk about how we feel about people or pets or our favorite dessert. There's romantic love, family love, the love of friends.

But what does the Bible say about love? What does Jesus mean when he says to love God and love your neighbor as yourself? Let's look more closely at this scene in Mark's Gospel and see how God wants us to be loved and to love.

Jesus is in Jerusalem, in the temple area, where he's been teaching and answering challenges from various groups. First, some chief priests, scribes, and elders questioned his authority. Then some Pharisees and some King Herod loyalists tried to trap him with a question about paying taxes. Then some Sadducees confronted him with a puzzle concerning resurrection.

Now, another scribe approaches him. The scribes, or teachers of the Jewish law, normally attack Jesus. So we might brace ourselves for trouble as this scribe questions Jesus. But there's a surprise in this encounter. This scribe admires Jesus' teaching. He asks a serious question and he and Jesus have a good discussion. Each of them has some affirmation, maybe admiration, for the other (on this insight, see C. Clifton Black, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Mark*, online <http://www.ministrymatters.com/reader/9781426750199/#chapter20.xhtml!ex17>, accessed 2/7/17).

The scribe asks Jesus which is the most important commandment. That is, which one explains them all, which commandment sums up the whole law? That was a common question. Various Jewish teachers debated it. And the answer Jesus gives was typical.

Jesus says that the most important commandment is this: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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 he quickly adds another clause, even though the scribe didn't ask for it. Jesus says that the second command is, "Love your neighbor as yourself." There's not a commandment in all the Law of Moses that's greater than these.

New Testament scholar Scot McKnight points out that Jesus answers the question by quoting the affirmation of faith, the creed that Jews recited twice daily. Many Jews still recite this passage daily. It comes from Deuteronomy 6 and it's called the *Shema*. That's the first word of it in

Hebrew. It means “hear” or “listen.” So the *Shema* is: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut 6:4-5). This is something every Jew was familiar with because they recited it every day. Jesus most likely recited it daily.

But Jesus amends the *Shema*, the Jewish affirmation of faith. He adds a line from Leviticus: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). He fuses those two commandments together into one. And in doing that he gives us what McKnight calls “the *Jesus Creed*.” It becomes an affirmation, a statement of faith, a guide for followers of Jesus. Following Jesus means loving God with all we are and loving others as ourselves. We live out our call to follow Jesus by hearing and heeding the call to love God and love our neighbor (McKnight has written a set of books about *The Jesus Creed*).

This great commandment contains three key elements in Christian faith: *belief in one God, whole-hearted devotion to God, and love of neighbor* (Pheme Perkins, *Mark, The New Interpreter’s Bible*, online <http://www.ministrymatters.com/library/#/tnic/3465474eaecaf2de5d1420947262eb93/mark-111-1337-jesusapos-ministry-in-jerusalem.html>, accessed 2/7/17). Let’s take a look at each of those elements.

A man told me one time that he could *fear* God, but he couldn’t *love* God. He had a certain idea about who God is and what God’s like—and what love is. If we’re going to love God with everything we are, we need to know who God is and we need to know what loving God means.

So we start with affirming faith in God. We acknowledge the Lord. “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Or it could be, “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” That is, only the Lord is God. There is only one true and living God, the creator God, the God of covenant, of faithful love, the God who reveals himself in Israel’s history and scriptures. And, the Lord God of Israel is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, and is the one who anoints Jesus with the Holy Spirit. The one Lord of Israel is the Trinity the Church believes and affirms faith in.

The God who is embodied and revealed in Jesus is the one we know and believe in and love. This is who Jesus is talking about when he says to love the Lord your God. So what does it mean to love God?

First, our love for God is always response. God always already loves us. Jesus knew and trusted his Father's love. Earlier in Mark's Gospel, the two times that God's voice speaks out loud are at Jesus' baptism and his transfiguration. At his baptism, the Father says to Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (1:11). At the transfiguration, the Father speaks to some disciples and says, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (9:7).

In John's Gospel, we see even more clearly God the Father's love for Jesus the Son. And Jesus tells his disciples, "The Father himself loves you" (16:27). He prays for his disciples, and for us: "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you have sent me, and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:22-23). Can you believe God loves you like he loves Jesus? The first letter of John says simply, "We love because God first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19).

What's this love of God like? It's self-giving, sacrificial love. We see this love most fully, most supremely at the cross. *Because Jesus was God, equal with God, he emptied himself and humbled himself, even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8).* God gives himself to us and for us. The cross reveals the love that's in God's heart from eternity.

That's the God we're called to love. How do we respond to that kind of love? We need to get past our ideas of love as just a feeling or something we fall into. This love is a choice, a commitment. Loving God means choosing to give ourselves to God, being devoted to God, being loyal to the only God who is God. We may or may not feel something. Our emotions follow our commitment, they don't lead it.

The Jewish law starts with worship, with the love of God. And Jesus affirms this. We're made in God's image, so we find the fullest meaning of our lives, we become who we really are, who we're meant to be, the more we love and worship the God we're designed to reflect. We don't do this just a little bit. "Heart, soul, mind, strength—that is, every aspect of human life—is to be poured out gladly in worship of the one true God" (N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*).

Jesus is saying that his kingdom-work, all that he's doing and will do for us puts this commandment within our reach. When Jesus gives a command, he also offers the help and resources we need to obey. When he tells us that following him means loving God with all we are, he'll make us able to love God with all that we are. When we commit to him and cooperate with him, we find power beyond ourselves to live the way God intends.

Scot McKnight tells about when he was young, his great-aunt took him to a large department store and told him he could have any one thing in the whole store. He just had to pick it out and she would buy it for him. His mom and dad were with him and while they coached him on some ideas, they let him make up his mind. Scot was a baseball nut, so he chose a first baseman's mitt and asked his great-aunt if he could also have a baseball. Knowing she was being let off easy, she said, "Sure."

Then he says that he imagines that we are inviting God into the department store of our life and we're offering to let God take whatever he wants. The difference is that the "one" thing God wants from us is *all* of us, all that we are (*40 Days Living the Jesus Creed* 11-12). God wants our love, and that takes every part of us to give and to live.

One way, maybe the main way, we live our love for God is loving our neighbors as ourselves. Following Jesus through faith in God and whole-hearted devotion to God pours out into love for others. What does that look like? McKnight says that love is almost undefinable. Then he gives a definition of it:

[Love] is unconditional regard for a person that prompts and shapes behavior in order to help that person to become what God desires. Love, when working properly, is both emotion and will, affection and action. (*40 Days* 8-9)

Jesus doesn't say, "Love your neighbor *instead* of yourself." He says, "Love your neighbor *as* yourself." Show to all people the same respect and care you show yourself. Again, the kingdom work of Jesus puts this commandment within our reach. "He really expects his followers to live it

out, because he believes that God is now fulfilling his ancient promise to renew people's hearts" (Wright).

Jesus is our example of this love. His conversation with this scribe in Mark 12 is a model of loving neighbor in a respectful conversation. The Gospels don't often say, "Jesus loved such and such a person." But we see him acting in ways that are loving. The Gospels often say that Jesus had compassion or was moved with compassion when he heals someone. Mark does tell us about when a rich man asked Jesus about eternal life. Jesus reminded him about the commandments, especially the ones that deal with how we relate to other people. The man said that he'd kept the commandments. "Jesus looked at him and loved him" (10:21).

The Jews of Jesus' day would have understood "neighbor" to refer to a fellow Jew. But Jesus is always pushing and stretching that definition. He tells one of his most famous parables in answer to a question about this commandment. After quoting the two great commandments, a scribe asks, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells about the man who was beaten and robbed and left for dead. The one who stopped to care for him was a Samaritan. We try to translate what the Samaritan would be in our day. My first thought was, a member of the Taliban or an illegal immigrant. One way to try to understand how Jews felt about Samaritans is to think of someone who's your opposite politically. They belong to a church that you think is offbeat, not really teaching the truth. May their family and yours have feuded for generations. That's something like how Jews and Samaritans felt about each other. And Jesus makes a Samaritan the hero of the story. Jesus concludes by asking, "Who was the neighbor to the one in need?" The scribe said, "The one who had mercy on him," and Jesus said, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:25-37).

Jesus tells his followers, "Love your enemies" (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27). It's not a big deal to love those who love you. But what about the ones who don't love you, that you may not even like? What about the ones who hurt you? How do we love them?

Remember, we're talking about love as regard for a person that leads us to act toward them in a way that will help them be what God wants.

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf is a Croatian Christian. During his compulsory military service, he was tested, persecuted and mentally tortured because of his faith. Loving an enemy starts with our memory, choosing to let the cross of Jesus define us and our relationship with the one who wronged us. Loving our enemy means remembering that they too are made in the image of God. Loving enemies becomes prayer and blessing for them. McKnight says that maybe the greatest prayer we can pray for someone who has wounded us is, "Lord, work in this person to help them become the person you want them to be." And he reminds us that Pope John Paul II extended forgiveness to the man who shot him. Miroslav Volf mentally forgave the captain who tortured him. "They did this by remembering the cross, welcoming the humanity of the offender, and extending grace through prayer and blessing to the other" (*40 Days* 91-95).

For most of us, loving our neighbor isn't big and dramatic. We just need to start where we are, with our closest neighbors—the people in our home, the people we work with and encounter regularly. We answer the call to follow Jesus, to love the Lord our God, as we love the people around us—people that God loves first, people that Jesus died for, people who may need our love to help them believe God's love.

I want to give you an exercise to help you remember the great commandment and begin to live it. Scot McKnight says that one year he decided to try to do what Jesus did, to say the *Shema* at least twice daily, and to recite it in the Jesus form, what he calls the "Jesus Creed." I have that printed on cards for each one of us. Carry it with you, put it somewhere you can see it often. Repeat it, let it get into you, pray it, commit to live it—and let's see what the Holy Spirit does with that commitment in our lives.

The Jesus Creed

Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself.

There is no commandment greater than these.

(From Mark 12:29-31)