

**“Close to the Kingdom”**  
**Mark 12:28-34 and Deuteronomy 6:1-6**  
**November 1, 2015**  
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What do you believe? Most every Sunday following the sermon, I ask us to state our beliefs when I say,

*“Let us now affirm our faith by reading together our Affirmation of Faith from the order of worship.*

*Sisters and Brothers, what is it that we believe?”* And then we repeat our affirmation of faith, usually a statement from scripture about what we believe Jesus said and did, or a statement honed through the centuries by the Christian Church about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Now, if you were to ask a person of the Jewish faith--*what do you believe?*--you might well hear this simple reply, perhaps even recited in Hebrew:

“Shema Israel, adonai eluheyenu, adonai echad.”

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord alone.”

That’s called the Shema, it is a very ancient statement of belief, as Terry just read for us. As you heard, the Shema was a prayer that was and is supposed to be said as you got up in the morning and as you lay down at night. For many Jews the Shema is not only said twice a day but it is printed and rolled into tiny scrolls and then placed in a mezuzah which is hung on the doorframe of your house and every time you enter or leave your home, you touch the mezuzah and remember—*The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.* It was thousands of years ago that Moses instructed the people of Israel. They were getting ready to enter the Promised Land. They had wandered for forty years in the wilderness after being slaves in Egypt for 400 years and now they were close, close to the Promised Land. All they had to do was cross over the River Jordan and they would be there, finally. And Moses, their leader, who was not permitted to enter the Promised Land with them, had these final words. He tells them that to be in the Promised Land here’s what you have to do: Love God; Love God with all that you are.

So now, fast forward a few thousand years to Jerusalem when Jesus is asked by the scribe, “Which is the greatest commandment?” Once again, like so many accounts in the Gospels, Jesus has been questioned, harangued by religious authorities who want to trip him up with “gotcha questions.” And now this scribe asks “Which is the greatest commandment?” Well, this time the answer is easy: *the Shema; the Lord is God, the Lord alone, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.* It’s an easy answer, and a very old one. But then Jesus adds something to it, “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Now, this is not a new idea in Judaism—to love your neighbor. It comes up in Leviticus in the Hebrew Scriptures and of course both Jesus and the scribe knew of it. But Jesus, in his response, raises two old ideas: one very prominent in one’s identity as a Jew—to love God; and the other, known but not stressed in Jesus’ time—to love one’s neighbor.

Loving your neighbor was—perhaps—an evolving concept in Judaism; the Palestinian Talmud, written in the centuries just after Jesus, goes so far to affirm that to “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is the major principle of the Torah. But in the time of Jesus, this was not yet the case.

Also, to be fair to other religions, the instruction to love your neighbor is neither unique to Judaism or Christianity. In Buddhism, the concept of *karuna* means to have compassion and mercy for all and Buddhists believe it is necessary to achieve enlightenment. In Hinduism, it is through our relationships with others, through recognizing the divine in everyone, that we encounter and honor God. In Islam, Muhammad says, “You will not enter paradise until you believe, and you will never believe until you love one another.”

So, if this idea of loving one’s neighbor as yourself was not new...what IS new? What is so new, so controversial, so heretical, yet so **powerful** that the scribes were thunderstruck, silenced and they dared not to ask him anything else?

Love God and love your neighbor... Love God and love your neighbor.

To do one thing is to do the other.

To fail to do one thing is to fail to do the other.

Jesus teaches us that we can't love God without also loving our neighbor. It feels like we are loving God when we are expressing love to our loved ones. Actively loving those around us is an act of loving God, like we are caring for the holy relationship with God through our love for others.

And likewise, we cannot hate our neighbor—treat another poorly—while not also compromising our love for God. To carry hate in your heart, to act unjustly to another injures your relationship with your self—it hardens the heart and makes life bitter but it also injures your relationship with God.

So, everyone should determine to just love their neighbor, right? That's the lesson for us in today's lectionary passage. But why is something that sounds so healthy so hard for humanity? As I considered this difficulty this week, I wondered whether the only one truly capable of loving perfectly is Jesus. Jesus doesn't name this as the most important commandment because it is easy. It is lifelong work. Learning to be a peacemaker within your own heart and soul is hard work and we will never be perfect. But ironically, it's when we can recognize the mutual difficulty—that it is difficult for you and it is difficult for me—realizing that I'm not perfect nor do I expect perfection from you—that we can take the first steps to love one another.

It seems simple yet it is so very difficult. In Jesus' time it was also controversial? All Jews knew that they were supposed to love God and follow his commandments, but to love one's neighbor was just part of the instructions in Leviticus—still important—but it didn't rise to the level of one of the Ten Commandments, nor is it part of the Shema.

Jesus elevates it from a teaching in Leviticus to a commandment. And not just a commandment but the *most important* commandment; to be yoked with the Shema for all eternity. "Love God... and love your neighbor."

And what happens next is unique among the Gospel narratives. One of the scribes agrees with him! He sees the wisdom in what Jesus says and knows that Jesus is right. Love of God and love of neighbor is the highest calling of humanity. It is not enough to show your love for God through your burnt offerings, it is more important to show your love for God through your love for one another.

Jesus praises him and tells "you are not far from the Kingdom of God." This takes us back to Moses telling the Israelites that they are not far from the Promised Land. Taken together, the scriptures from the Hebrew Testament and the New are telling us that it isn't the physical location, the point on the map or some elusive destination not of this world or of this lifetime. The Promised Land, the Kingdom of God is now, in the love we have for God shown through our love for one another. The kingdom of God is not a place. It is not somewhere you can go, there's no river to cross to get to it, you can't throw a rock and hit it. The kingdom of God is not a place, it is a condition. It may not be someplace that you can go but it is something that you can see. Jesus and the scribe just told us what it looks like. It is when people love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. It is when people love their neighbor as themselves. That's the kingdom of God.

Jesus has invited us to be here this morning, on this All Saints Day, to be with each other and to be with him. He invites us to be here with him to share in this meal, this foretaste of what will be in the kingdom of heaven. Because the kingdom can be right here, here among us, here within us, here where God is loved with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. Here where, however imperfectly, we learn to love each other and all our neighbors. Here where we are called to gather around this table and

as the prayer says “joining our voices with angels and archangels, with prophets, apostles and martyrs, and will all the faithful of every time and place.” Like the Israelites entering the Promised Land, like the Scribe, **we are not far, the kingdom is very close; it is here among us; here within us; here with each other; the kingdom of God is in our grasp, as we learn to love.**

