

Enough

by

The Reverend Franklyn C. Pottorff
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

October 31, 2021

Mark 12:28-34

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you 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.’ ³¹The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³²Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

I think it was the barrenness that was terrifying. By late March of last year, the run on certain products had left shelves completely empty in some store aisles. We remember those bizarre days and strange scenes. Disposable masks and latex gloves were already gone. Bottles of Tylenol were rationed at the counter.

Hand sanitizer was nowhere to be found. If some poor clerk stocked a shelf with even a few rolls of toilet paper, you grabbed them first; and then if you didn't need them, you determined who among your loved ones would be worthy of such lavatory luxuries. It was a dog-eat-dog time.

I was visiting a family member not long after the pandemic began. I noticed their pantry door was open. It was filled to overflowing with rolls of paper towels. When I asked them why they had so many, they told me it was in preparation for the Apocalypse and presumably Christ's return. I looked again at the paper towels. What kind of a mess do they believe Jesus is going to cause?

The premise of economics is scarcity. It is the basic assumption that there are a limited number of resources in the world. The value of goods and services is determined by scarcity. How much demand is there for a certain thing? How much are people willing to give to get it? Do we have enough?

And so the scribe asks Jesus, "which commandment is the first of all?" And Jesus tells him that the Lord God of Israel is one. And you shall love this One, the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." And then without being asked, Jesus tells the scribe what the second commandment is, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

It's worth noting how Matthew and Luke later relay this exchange. Matthew leaves out any mention of needing strength to love God, which is initially included in the Deuteronomic text. And Luke's gospel places

this conversation at the beginning of the parable of the Good Samaritan, offered by Jesus to a lawyer who wants to know how to inherit eternal life.

But the scribe here in Mark simply inquires which commandment is the primary instruction? What is the initial act of discipleship for the people of God? What is the first thing we are called to do? The thing from which all other actions and desires flow. Love God, with all that we have and all that we are, and love our neighbor just as much as we love ourselves.

Which, when we think about it, means that Jesus knows self-love to be pretty universal. We humans are predominately self-interested. And American culture promotes a whole industry built around such an idea under the title “self-care.” So Jesus speaks to the very heart of the human condition when he tells the scribe that we are called to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves.

I believe it was Kierkegaard who wisely observed that Jesus doesn’t ask us to determine who is our neighbor, but to *be* a good neighbor oneself.

And so we are called to adore God and cherish the ones with whom we share this little planet.

+ + +

It’s Dedication Sunday, and in just a bit we will share in a litany of promises, committing our pledges to God for the coming year. It’s also Reformation Sunday, which means now is as good a time as any to talk about what this place is, why we are here, and what we do with what we have to love God and love our neighbor.

For nearly 150 years, people have been calling us a church; which is really just a gathering of folks bound up in an awareness that not only

is there more to life than what we can see, but that the More we have come to experience has met us in the person of Jesus Christ, a carpenter's son turned rabbi from the ancient Near East. In whose life we live, and in whose death we never truly die.

Our particular persuasion of the Christian faith as Presbyterians means we lay emphasis on God's sovereignty, and on our inability to be sovereign ourselves.

God's love for us has absolutely nothing to do with our behavior, our character, or our choices. Doesn't matter if we are Henry Kissinger, Bernie Madoff, or Malala Yousafzai. To be sure, such a radical proclamation of God's mercy is costly. Grace is always free, but it is never cheap.

Our church's *Book of Order* says it like this, "The church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life." As a response to God's love, we are a people who are called to be self-giving in a way that could border on the dangerous. But *at the risk of losing one's life*? Makes me wonder if the author of that line actually knows many Presbyterians personally. We are an incredibly cautious people.

Yet as descendants of the Reformation, we proclaim a liberating freedom in Jesus Christ. As a pastor, I can't tell you what to do. I tried once, and it didn't work. God's deep love for you has freed you from needing to please or placate religious institutions in order to earn divine favor.

But therein lies the problem of any talk of freedom. We often discuss freedom in the negative, we are freed *from* one thing or another. But a proper discussion of Christian freedom is the notion of being freed *for* something. No longer bound by a sense that we must work for God's adoration, our freedom allows us to work *for* the peace, redemption, and

reconciliation of the world as a response to that love. We are freed *to* love our neighbor and to love God.

Christian Ethicist Daniel Bell says, “freedom is consenting to the good; it is accepting the call of the good.” He writes “Christianity proclaims that there is indeed a good that unites all of humanity, that there is a love in which we are all invited to share. This common good is the end or purpose for which we were created, namely, communion in the divine life.”¹

We were created to share our lives with others. To make the world a little better in God’s name. And not only that. In this divine economy, we recognize that not everything in the free market is value neutral.

We as Christians must determine what constitutes the furthering of human flourishing. And we are called to push back against greed, the desiring of what is more than enough. How do we do all that?

From this place, we do that in myriad ways. We make food, extend grants, build chairs, sing songs of triumph and lament. We convene speakers on topics that are affecting our culture and our world. We recite old creeds and listen to ancient words from scripture. We learn the rhythms of confession and forgiveness. We bless babies with water and eat tiny bites of bread and take thimble size amounts of grape juice. We participate in patterns old and new that not only shape our days, but teach us how to live, how to see the world with new eyes.

All of which leads us to think about what a Sunday dedicated to promises of shared treasure has to do with the mission of the church. Stewardship, the umbrella term by which the church speaks of its financial support, is not about simply paying our dues.

¹ Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *The Economy of Desire*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) 164-165.

It is tending our souls in a particular way so that we can see our wealth properly as an instrument to invest in God's kingdom. It is a subversive act in which we participate, denying the power of money to determine our self-worth by our net worth.

As much as economic analysis tells us otherwise, we know that life is about giving away; that the more we give, the more we actually receive. That might sound a bit trite this morning, but I suspect we know the truth of it. Our lives are only as rich as how we choose to invest them.

Do we invest in mercy, in charity, in acts of service, in commitment to neighbors near and far? Are the deposits we make concerned with making the world a more just and peaceful place?

That's in part what a pledge to BMPC means this morning. You lift up a promise of commitment to this place, to further the ministry of this congregation. To share the love of Jesus Christ. To help us make our small dent in the greater crack of God's inbreaking against sin and death. We know we do not do this work alone.

Several weeks ago Agnes told a tale about a man found on a deserted island. It reminded me of another story I heard once. I believe it was a true story.

Some years back, three people, one from the Church of the Redeemer, one from St. Luke's United Methodist, and one Bryn Mawr Presbyterian member, are all stranded on a desert island in the South Pacific. The Episcopalian and the Methodist light fires, wave flags, draw big signs in the sand, hoping desperately to be rescued.

The BMPC member meanwhile does nothing. The others, annoyed, question, "Why are you not helping us attract attention? Do you not want to be rescued?" The Presbyterian replies, "I am a member

of the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. The Stewardship Committee will find me.”

It’s a true story, I think. If it’s not, it should be. As a minister, I am unapologetic in my belief that participation in the stewardship efforts of this church is an act of Christian discipleship. We are shaped by our giving, and you are invited to share in the common work of God’s people here. Your generosity is a gift that you already possess. In sharing that gift with us, we as a community of faith work to stretch it.

+ + +

We’ve come a long way from empty shelves and rationed products. But we still have a bit further to go before we are resuming life in ways that we knew it before the virus. Even so, we reject a mindset of scarcity. There is enough, and I’m not just talking about paper towels.

When our neighbors cry out in need, we have the capacity, the resources, the gifts to respond. Because in God’s good and faithful love, we proclaim, even among empty shelves, there is enough for all of us. Amen.