

Psalm 24 ~ Mark 12:28-34

*First Things First*

November 4, 2018 ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion

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### **Introduction to Gospel Text**

Between last week's gospel reading and today's, while we were busy clearing leaves, Trick or Treating, binging on candy, bow hunting or setting up for rifle season of deer hunting, Jesus had a busy week too. He has entered Jerusalem triumphantly for the last time on a donkey; he has gone into the temple and disrupted business there, overturning tables and causing a ruckus; and just now, he has been mixing it up with the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. Debater Jesus has been in a smack down series of disputes as they try to entrap him with tricky Torah questions—about paying taxes and how marriage laws work in heaven. Mind you this was a popular sport of a sort among religious leaders and scholars in Jesus' time. But in this context, on Tuesday of Jesus' last week on earth in the narrative world of Mark, the volume is turned way up. The final showdown has begun, with the crowd cheering and jeering in the background.

The story you are about to hear, where Jesus is asked “Which commandment is the first of all?” is also found in Matthew and Luke. In Luke, it serves as the set up for the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25), but not in Mark. In Matthew, the lawyer asks him this question “to test him” (Matt 22:35), but not in Mark. Here, the set up and the resolution go another way. Today's story is a surprising departure for Mark's gospel, where the scribe and Jesus appear to share a point of agreement; you can almost see them giving each other a collegial high-five. As I read this text, Listen for what it is that they agree upon, what it is that they share: It is at the core of their faith. Enjoy this rare moment of relative harmony—next week Jesus' haranguing of the scribes will resume.

### **Sermon**

Is that a Mallard Duck? Could it be a Blue-Winged Teal? Or perhaps a common Wood Duck? I wondered this as I was paddling along the middle of Sandy Creek (better known as “Sandy Crick,” by the locals) on what would be my last chance to Paddle Board up the creek behind our house this season. Having recently been gifted with a *Birds of Wisconsin Field Guide* book, when I saw these ducks in the distance my heart leaped within me: here is my chance to use my fledgling skills in Wisconsin bird identification. And so I paddled up closer and closer to them, as silently as I could. What is the color, the size, the beak shape? Which kind of duck could they be? But as I kept paddling nearer and nearer they didn't start to swim or fly away. “That's weird,” I thought. Next thing I knew I was right up on them and then it dawned upon me: these are decoy ducks, dummy! (In my weak defense, I will point out that I didn't have my glasses on.) Nevertheless, I had been totally fooled: these were fake ducks. Not the real thing at all. But they bobbed up and down and from a distance seemed very real.

What is true and what is false? What is real and what is fake? It can be hard to know. It can be difficult to tell the difference until we are right up in it, sometimes. Lesson learned: Even if it looks like a duck, it may *not* be a duck. Here's the thing, with ducks at *some* point you can be sure. But with God—it can be more difficult to sort out. When we are making decisions, large and small, how do we know when we are really seeing

God's truth? Or is it something else? We need some way to distinguish between the Good News and fake news.

There are so many voices, many of them shouting at us here in the final days before Tuesday's, mid-term Election Day. I believe the call to identify God's truth with all our hearts; souls, minds and strength couldn't be more relevant and timely. How can we connect with our core truth, with the Good News of God who became One of us, to save us all, at a time such as this? We have so many voices, so many sources of news and commentary, day and night. It's hard to know how to connect to the real source. And to identify the multiple decoys that might otherwise fool us.

Have you heard of Ryder Carroll? He invented the "Bullet Journal," a pen and paper journal method he describes as a "mindfulness practice disguised as a journal system." "In an interview I heard recently, he explained that its genesis began when he was young, and was diagnosed with A.D.D. He faced extreme challenges with focus and organization, and all he had on hand was pen and paper. What struck me in the context of today's sermon was when he said this, "Technology is incredibly valuable and has allowed us to connect with the world around us in ways that we never imagined before, but I feel like the more connected we get with the world around us, the less connected we are with the world within us. Our lives have sort of turned into an always online, always available existence, and in that we don't really have an opportunity to think anymore."<sup>i</sup>

Do Ryder Carroll's works ring true for you? How often do we "Lift up our heads, O Gates" from our devices and screens and let our hearts be lifted up, so that "the King of glory may come in"? When our heads start to spin with trying to figure out what is truth and what is a lie, what is real and what is fake, remember this ancient song from Psalm 24. And lift up your head. Today's gospel story points to a practice that Jesus and the scribe shared, a method they used to lift up their heads not once but twice a day, and sometimes even more. This was intended to protect them from getting derailed or distracted by false or fake news in their day. Indeed, this is not just a 21<sup>st</sup> century problem. It was a 1<sup>st</sup> century problem as well.

Jesus and all practicing Jews of his time, recited this core affirmation, known as the Shema, not once, but twice daily, every morning and evening: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you 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." (Deut 6:5-6). Not only did they recite it twice daily, they also put it into small container called a Mezuzah that was mounted on their doorpost to remind them as they entered and exited their home, that this is the core truth by which to live their lives.

Sandy Sasso, Rabbi and author, wrote a story titled, *The Shema in the Mezuzah*,<sup>ii</sup> based on how a disagreement was resolved in the 12<sup>th</sup> century between the great Torah commentator Rashi and his grandson, Rabbenu Tam, regarding how to place the mezuzah on the doorpost of the home, since there was no instruction in the Torah about its placement. It's a great story, and what we learn is that the Mezuzah is placed at an angle (neither vertical or horizontal) to remind everyone in the house of the need to compromise when in the throws of conflict. A few summers ago my former church in Dayton invited Rabbi Sasso to lead a one-day "Grand Camp" where young children and their grandparents

attended and had great fun hearing the story, discussing its meaning and making Mezuzahs to take home.

Katie, a mom of four children in this church sent her two youngest, named Sammie (age 6) and Charlie (age 4) with her parents to Grand Camp. She told me that after Grand Camp the most amazing thing had started happening. Whenever Sammie and Charlie got into their usual little fights, they would run to their Mezuzah, right in the heat of an argument and put their hands on it together. This would calm them, and they would shake off whatever had been riling them. Somehow running and touching their Mezuzah placed at an angle, reminded them of even as young children, that loving God and loving each other comes first.

Across our nation we have been reeling in the wake of the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue realizing again the horrific and damage one individual can do who contradicts this truth violently. Rabbi Jeffrey Myers, Rabbi of the Tree of Life congregation in Pittsburgh where eleven worshippers were gunned down during Shabbat services last Saturday, met together with Rev. Eric S.C. Manning who leads Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. where nine parishioners were shot to death in a racist attack during a Bible Study on June 17, 2015. These two men did not know each other before but became bound together by the unspeakable grief of these two “unconscionable desecrations.” This incident, like at Emanuel, was not an attack on a particular group,” the rabbi said at the close of the meeting. “It was an attack on America because it challenges our right to assemble and worship our God in the way we want. It has continued a downward spiral of hate, one that’s prevalent in all corners of the United States.”<sup>iii</sup>

How can we reverse this spiral of hate? How can we lift up our heads and rise up again, knowing Christ overcame death and sin once and for all? It starts with living into the greatest commandment, named by Jesus and the Scribe on that rare but pivotal Tuesday of his final week. Just as those two came together that day, I think it even more important today to lay hold of the truth that this two-fold commandment to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves stands at the core not only of Christianity, but Judaism and Islam to this day. The command to love God and neighbor above all, is also great because it traverses and defies any boundaries we might try to place upon it.

According to a story reported in the Talmud, a Gentile asked two of the best-known Pharisaic teachers in the first century, Shammai and Hillel, to teach him the whole of the Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai drove him away with a stick, because he said, The Torah cannot be crystallized. But Hillel responded, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereon; go and learn it.”<sup>iv</sup> We find a similar Muslim story in the hadith, the collected oral and written accounts of the Prophet Muhammad and his teachings during his lifetime: A Bedouin came to the prophet, grabbed the stirrup of his camel and said: O the messenger of God! Teach me something to go to heaven with it. Prophet said: "As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don't do to them. Now let the stirrup go!" [This maxim is enough for you; go and act in accordance with it!]<sup>v</sup>

“Go and learn it.” “Go and act in accordance with it.” How do we do that as Christians? The Mezuzah is not part of our tradition, but perhaps it should be!

We have two other core practices that help us as practicing Christians remember the Greatest Commandment. Two practices intended to reconnect our inner souls with our outer worlds: Our weekly offering and the sacrament of Holy Communion. Whether we give electronically or physically place our offering in the plate as it is passed, the ushers bring all our offerings forward, we sing the doxology: these actions are intended to reset, recalibrate, realign our heart, soul, mind and strength with God in front and center.

Next Sunday we have the once a year chance to bring our pledge forward for the coming year. As we seek to increase our capacity to Love as we have been commanded, as we seek to go deeper into the work of restorative justice, we can make that pledge real, by pledging more than we did last year. If we can't make a full step up, any amount up, is a significant step in the "Greatest Commandment" direction. Every member of your Session, has promised to increase their pledges for 2019 and invites you to accept this challenge. Your children and teens have been given age appropriate pledge sheets. Let those sheets serve as a conversation starter this week for your family about how to put first things first in the midst of your daily lives. Everyone does it differently. How are you doing it? Your children will want to know.

In a few moments we will share Holy Communion: A meal with the One who is the way, the truth and the life. The Real Deal. There is nothing false or fake about this bread and this cup. As we prepare to come to the Table and join our voices together to sing our Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, I invite you to remember and claim in your heart our core truth, the Great Commandment. In this is our hope. As Walter Brueggemann has written, "As the community sings itself toward faith, the song makes it possible to imagine life differently."<sup>vi</sup> Amen, so shall it be.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/381444600/marketplace>

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *The Shema in the Mezuzah: Listening to Each Other*, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012).

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/03/us/pittsburgh-synagogue-charleston-emanuel.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2006), 70.

<sup>v</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_Rule](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule)

<sup>vi</sup> Walter Brueggemann, William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 130.