

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 ~ Mark 12:28-34

*Follow the Sound of the Genuine*

Reformation Sunday ~ 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost ~ October 31, 2021

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### *Introduction to Scripture*

You are probably looking forward to a refreshing, inspiring, unifying, worship experience this morning. We can all certainly use a break from the divisive politics, the noise we hear and the rancor we feel that makes us heartsick—no matter where we may be on the political spectrum. Yet, to be true to the spirit and the sound of our gospel lesson, I must tell you that its context is anything but peaceful and apolitical. In Mark 12, Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time. His presence threatens those in power. He has entered the temple, where his religious and political opponents are in the midst of verbal sparring. They want to arrest him. Where today's story begins, at verse 28, we are already on round 2. As Mark sets it up for us in v. 13, "Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said."

It's getting down and dirty. Ugly back and forth wrangling. Yes: political, civic, and religious authorities squabbling? Imagine that. Shooting questions at each other that aren't really questions. Shouting at each other, not really listening. Not that again. Not here. But here we are, smack in the middle of the temple: game on, getting hot and hotter. And just then a scribe, a religious authority whom you would *expect* to be on the opposite side of Jesus, shocks everyone. Maybe even Jesus.

Why? This scribe was actually *listening* to Jesus' words. Notice how this scribe, unlike any other in the whole gospel of Mark, chose to "reach across the political aisle" as we say today. After listening to Jesus, this scribe asks him a real question. One that Rabbis are often asked. It is a question that goes right to the heart of Torah teaching: "Of all our 613 commandments, *Which commandment is the first of all?* Tell me teacher, which is the one that holds up all the rest."

These days, we might also call this an invitation for "an elevator speech" moment, where you catalyze your audience with a brief, but genuine pitch, in this case a distillation of the whole faith by which you live. The Bible is so long and can be so confusing, it's a question you may be asking right now, too. "I've got so much stuff to try and figure out, Jesus, it's so complicated. Just tell me, what is the most important thing?" We get an answer here. Just the one we need today.

### *Sermon*

So, if you think about it, Beatles John Lennon and Paul McCartney were right: "All you need is love." Wasn't that essentially what you just heard Jesus and the scribe agree upon? Their common ground: Love God. Love Neighbor. Love Self. That's it. They were pulling this from the central confessional statement of ancient Israel: Deuteronomy 6:4 known as the Shema, and Leviticus 19:18. Love is the central command. More important even than religious ritual. So, if "all we need is love," what's our problem?

Now is *my* chance to surprise, and maybe even shock you. You've heard plenty of sermons about loving God and loving neighbor. That usually where we get to work on this text. But if we are honest, I think the hardest part of this three-part commandment, to Love God, Love Neighbor, Love Self, is the *third* one: the command to love yourself. To actually "observe" this central command, which can also be translated as "do these commandments": we need all three actively in play: They are interdependent. Each strengthens the other. So today, let's talk about loving yourself.

We may shy away from talking about "loving yourself" because it sounds like being selfish. Far from it. Loving yourself, your genuine self, is essential to following the greatest commandment. It just dawned on me this week, that the command to love your neighbor *as* yourself is actually a double challenge: (1) to love yourself and in doing that, we discover this means (2) to love your neighbor as only you can do. The African American author, theologian, educator and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman, called this "The Sound of the Genuine" in a baccalaureate address he delivered to the graduating class of 1980 at Spelman College. These are his words:

*There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the genuine in yourself, and if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is you are searching for and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born. You are the only you that has ever lived. You are the only idiom of its kind in all the existences, and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.*

He also goes on to teach us how this love of self is the key to loving our neighbor:

*I'm secure because I hear the sound of the genuine in myself, and having learned to listen to that, I can become quiet enough, still enough to hear the sound of the genuine in you. When I see in me what you see in me—the wall that separates and divides will disappear and we will become one because the sound of the genuine makes the same music. When these two sounds come together, this is the music God heard when he said, "Let us make humans in our own image."*

Love begins with "L" for listen. Just as Moses begins the command with the Hebrew word "Shema", which means "hear" or "listen." This is where must begin, as individuals and as a church. Are we listening for the sound of the genuine in our church today? This is an important question to ask every day, but especially today, on Reformation Sunday. Since we are Presbyterians and not Lutherans you may be scratching your head trying to remember what Reformation Sunday is. Here's a quick answer. We call this Reformation Sunday because it was exactly 504 years ago to the day, October 31, 1517, when young adult Martin Luther could no longer hear the sound of the genuine in his beloved church. He also listened to the voice of God within him telling him to do something about it.

If Martin Luther made his play today, he would likely have made a Tiktok video, posted on Instagram, and Tweeted out his 95 Theses or Disputation on the 95 ways that the church was missing the mark. Instead, he wrote them out on pieces of paper and posted them on the door of the Wittenberg chapel, in Germany where he was serving as a priest.

Why do you suppose he chose October 31? I wonder if it had something to do with being "All Hallows' Eve," the night before All Saints' Day, November 1. Perhaps he felt and heard, along with the voice of God the presence of all the Saints in heaven joining the chorus of outrage: the institutional church is going off the rails. It's about Love. It's not about paying indulgences to the church as a security deposit for your slot in heaven. We heard as much in today's scripture when the scribe said to Jesus that loving God, neighbor, and self, "is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Mark 12:33) If our rituals of worship do not engender love of God, neighbor, and self: we are not listening to God. And we are not being the church, the Body of Christ, on earth.

Just yesterday, your session gave six hours to a visioning retreat led by our Transitional General Presbyter, Dave Colby. We did have fun (ask us about the name game), and we enjoyed great food, beginning with delicious scones baked by Lisa Carroll, who hosted us at their home alongside the Yellow River in Pittsville. Along with the fun, we also listened to one another realizing that no one person is the expert, rather everyone brings the expertise of their own unique perspective on the work at hand. We began by listening to what we have learned beginning with life during COVID. What have we gained and what have we lost? Like the printing press that spurred the Protestant reformation, the new technologies that COVID has forced us to adopt, is expanding and changing how we see "church." Love begins with "L" for Listening. Loving our church begins with listening for where God might be leading us now. Who is God calling us to love in our community and in the world today?

I think the scribe surprised Jesus, perhaps my sermon on loving ourselves surprised you. Now my final surprise story for this sermon came last Thursday night, with 12 seconds left to play. Yes, I'm talking about the Green Bay Packers after a 94-yard drive by the Cardinals put a victory within reach for Arizona. But on second and goal from the Packer's 5-yard line, Kyler Murray attempted a quick back-shoulder throw to A. J. Green that he never saw coming his way and never turned around to find. Rasul Douglas *did* see the incoming pass and picked it off in the end zone for a touchback to seal the Green Bay victory. That's right: AJ Green didn't turn around, didn't see it. But Rasul did. No one seemed more surprised than Rasul. His interception swung the momentum, just when it seemed like all was about lost.

I loved what Rasul said in his interview after the game. "Everybody is a starter. If you get called, you are ready for the moment." "Snap! I never won a game before!" The interviewer asked him, "How do you keep yourself locked in? Rasul answered: "Just prayer. I'm big on Jesus and God so I pray all day. That's just me. That's where I get myself from. So, I just stay down. Doing what I do and eventually something good will happen."<sup>iii</sup> Rasul was following the sound of the genuine.

What about us? Everybody is a starter in God's eyes. And here's our play every day and every night: Love God, love neighbor, love self. The first letter in love is "L" for listen. Shema, Listen. The first word from God through Moses. Are we listening? Can we hear it? Listen to God's voice telling you that you are loved by God. Beloved in God's eyes just as you are: because you are. Yes, created in God's image. Able to listen and to love as only you can do. Calling you to listen and love as only you can do. Beginning with yourself. Yes, Rasul, like you said, "Everybody is a starter." Who is God calling you to start loving, to start listening to, today?

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<sup>i</sup> <http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening>.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSqHXQSVDpQ>