

“The Fourth Stage” | *Mark 12:28-34*

Ecclesia

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So, I have to be honest with you this morning.

I come this morning in a spirit of confession.

No, I'm not gonna stand up here this morning and open the door on some scandal.

(Don't worry)

But I need to be honest with you about what's going on in my life and my heart

with the hopes that it might speak to you

with the hopes that the Holy Spirit might use my current struggles

to draw us all closer to the cross of Christ

closer to the powerful, healing heart of God.

So, let us begin with a word of prayer.

In our text for this morning, Jesus is approached by one of the scribes

(a professional expert on the Jewish law)

and is asked a question:

“Which commandment is the greatest?”

(which command is first of all)

Jesus responds by repeating the Shema

(“shema” being the Hebrew word for hear)

“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.”

from the book of Deuteronomy

Basically, Jesus tells the man:

“The greatest commandment is this: love God with everything.”

Everything that you have

Everything that you are

Everything that you do

Love God.

I've come across a number of books over the years that want to break down

exactly what Jesus is trying to say.

They want to make comparisons or explanations that correspond to each of these:

Emotionally

Spiritually

Mentally

Physically

Much like I did with the children this morning.

There's nothing wrong with that.

But what Jesus is saying is -

it's all God's,

God gave it to you,

there's nothing you have that God doesn't already control.
Therefore, use it to love God.

Jesus goes on to these familiar words:

“The second is like it - you shall love your neighbors as yourself.”

In our twitter-happy world, we like to latch on to these kinds of sayings
that cut through all the noise and get right to the point.

Isn't that how we do things in advertising and politics
You need a tag line
a saying that everyone will remember

So, I can't tell you how many churches I have found that have summarized these two commands
and used them as a tag line for who they are as a group
(I've printed one of these on the front of your bulletin)
“Love God. Love Others.”
“Love God. Love People.”

That sounds like a pretty good summary of the message of Jesus, doesn't it?
You couldn't really go wrong with that, could you?
However . . .

However, that summary - as good as it may be -
leaves out two VERY important words that have smacked me in the face
over and over again these past few weeks
as I've had to take a long hard look in the mirror.

Some of you may already be anticipating it
“as yourself”

Now, scripture teaches us that “we love because God first loved us”
Therefore, all of our expressions of love are a reflection of the love
that God has poured so graciously into us
and has shown us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus

However, our ability to express love
and to give love to others (including God)
is rooted in our ability to love ourselves.

I think that the best I have come to understand it
is explained by an ancient monk by the name of Bernard of Clairvaux
Bernard was born in 1090 on the outskirts of Dijon, France
He joined the Cistercians in 1112.

The Cistercians were a reform order of monastics
they wanted to take Benedictine monasticism to a more primitive and austere state
(very strict rules on food, sleep, prayer, study, work, etc.)

Around 1128, Bernard wrote a work entitled “On Loving God”

In it, he outlined four stages of what it means to love God

This writing has proven to be a deep well from which
Many have drawn nourishment.

I would like to share them with you this morning (adapted a bit).

Bernard says that the first stage of love is that **I love me for me.**

This is the completely narcissistic love of infancy.

Anyone who has been around babies for any length of time knows
that a baby does not care about anything but itself.

A baby cries when it is hungry

thirsty

tired

needs a diaper change

and on and on.

the baby does not care what kind of day you’ve had
whether you are on the phone
or in the middle of something at the moment
whether you’re awake or asleep
or any other consideration

a baby is completely focused on itself.

And, while we wouldn’t fault an infant for this kind of behavior,
we frown on it when we see it in adults, right?

But we do still see it in folks of all ages from time to time.

We had a friend in college who was in the deaf education program at our college

Her friends had given her a sign name (a name used in sign language)

It was this: the first letter of her name

and the rest of the world revolving around it.

We know those folks for whom it seems like the world revolves around them

and their needs but they don’t even notice the needs of anyone else around them.

This is the first stage of love - I love me for me.

The second stage of love is that **I love you for me** (God for me)

This is what I like to think of as the greedy love of toddlers.

Toddlers begin to understand where things come from
and they can be easily bribed.

We know this when we send our children to their grandparents or aunts or uncles
and they come back saying, “I like Uncle Will - he gives me candy”

“I like spending the night with Grandma, she gives me presents.”

“I like going to my friend’s house, they don’t have any rules.”

I love you for what you do for me.
You know what I'm talking about here
That name that pops up on caller i.d.
and you immediately think, "What does he want this time?"
It's the conditional love of the takers.

The "what's in it for me"
as long as you keep giving, I'll keep loving
kind of love.

But as soon as the milk has run dry,
I'm jumping over to this next relationship/friendship
to get what I need out of them.

This is the second stage.

The third stage begins to shift a little - **I love you for you** (God for God)
This is a dangerous stage.
It almost sounds like a great thing, until we really stop to think about it.

I like to think of this as the "late adolescent, early adult stage."
Do you remember the first time you fell in love?
For a little while, it was all about them.
"I don't really like that kind of movie, but whatever you want."
"I don't want to go to that party, but whatever you want."
"I don't like wearing these clothes, but whatever you want."

In those first stages of love, we will do anything for the other person.
It doesn't matter what I like or want - I want you to be happy.
It's all about you.

Usually, however, this doesn't look quite so stark.
People that love in this way are usually the people that everyone brags about:
"They are so unselfish"
"Such a team player"
"They are such a giver"

Oftentimes, however, there are others words that are much less kind
"She is such a doormat"
"... a pushover"
"... gets walked all over"
"... so spineless"

People who are trapped in this stage of love often give to the point
that they lose sense of their own identity.
They don't even know who they are because they are living for someone else
(spouse, children, friends, jobs, neighbors, etc.)

It's all about you - I am not important.
The third stage of love.

Then there's the fourth stage - **I love me for you.**

This is level of full grown, adult, mature love.

This level says, "I must love myself, take care of myself, protect myself so that I can be fully present to you as I seek to love you."

Let me illustrate it this way:

Last week, Orestes talked about the image of the garden.

If I want to be able to feed others from the fruit of my garden,
there are some things that I must do.

I have to spend time plowing and preparing the ground to prepare it to receive seeds.

I have to actually go out and plant seeds

I have to put up boundaries to protect those little seedlings from predators
who want to come and eat the new growth

I have to water the plants

I have to pull up the weeds that threaten to choke out the growth that is taking place

I have to remove disease and insects that will do harm to the plants
(and spread to others if I ignore them)

I have to prune areas that are overgrown to make room for maximum growth
and fruitfulness

I have to go out and harvest the fruit when it is ready

If I fail to do any of these things,

it is unlikely that I will be able to feed anyone else with the fruit from my garden.

This is also true of the gardens that are our lives.

If I want to be able to love you, I have to first love and care for me.

If I want to have anything of value to give to you,
I must first cultivate that in my own life.

In other words, "Love your neighbor **as yourself.**"

The problem is that we live in such a frazzled and busy world.

We are over-scheduled,
over-worked,
over-stimulated.

I heard a story this past week on ESPN radio about the doping
that is taking place in Major League Baseball.

This particular commentator was lamenting the fact that he felt people would forget
about it or even ignore in a short amount of time.

His reasoning was that we live in a world where people walk around in a

"drug-induced haze" - Caffeine, nicotine, sleeping pills, anti-depressants, stimulants, etc.

There are very few people that aren't chemically altered in some way each day.

I don't know if I buy his conclusion that this will cause us to ignore those who are cheating
at a game that I truly love, but his point is taken.

We do live in drug-saturated society

because we feel that we need it to get through our to-do list

and it has become an acceptable way to live (an encouraged way to live).

We should not laugh at someone who tells us they have a 2 pot a day habit on coffee
or a 4 Red Bulls a day habit (or Monster, or 5 Hour Energy, or any other energy drink)

It's not funny that our lives are so out of control that
we have to sit down and schedule out a time to meet for 30 minutes weeks in advance

It's not funny that we don't have time to sit down and eat with our children
or really talk to them (or better - listen to them)
because we are running from one appointment to another
with no time to spare.

It's not funny that we are so stretched financially
that we can't give to our church to support the work God is doing there
or give to someone in need who asks us for help

It's not funny that we don't have time to pray or read our Bible
or focus at all on our relationship with God

When I love me for you, it means that I am willing to set healthy boundaries in my life
so that I can live in a healthy manner.

Physical
Emotional
Relational
Mental
Spiritual
Temporal (schedules)
Financial (commitments, stuff)

It means that I am willing to develop some healthy habits in my life
so that I can be fully present
and will have fruit from my garden to offer

Prayer
Scripture Study
Worship
Accountability
Sharing my Faith
Giving
Honesty
Integrity
Fellowship

My confession to you this morning is this:

Michelle and I have run hard into the brick wall of our own humanity
We have discovered over the last few weeks that our hearts were much bigger
than our humanity could handle.

In our desire to serve and help others,
we have stretched ourselves so thin
that we haven't done any of it well.

I can honestly say that, over the past 6 months or so
I have not been the kind of dad my children need
I have not been the kind of husband my wife needs
I have not been the kind of son my mom needs me to be
I have not been the kind of pastor this church needs
I have not been the kind of man God needs me to be

I have not taken care of myself - heart, soul, mind, and strength
I have not loved myself for you
and I am sorry
and I ask you to forgive me.

And my hunch is that if we are all honest with ourselves this morning,
We need to do a lot of repenting in this place.
I would bet that we've got a lot of loving me for me here.
I would bet we've got a lot of loving others for what they can do for me.
I know we've got a lot here who have given and given and given
to the point that they are exhausted, burned out, with nothing left

Yes, we've got some repenting to do.
For we need remember the words from the letter to the Ephesians:

¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

And what does that love look like? Once again, listen to words of the Apostle Paul:

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends.

It's so easy to hear these words and place them in the context of the way we should love others
but this is also the way we should love ourselves for the sake of others -
with patience, kindness, humility, forgiveness, honesty, truth, hope, endurance

This is the kind of love our Savior displayed when he gathered with his disciples
just before his death on the cross.

It is just this kind of love that draws us to this table right now.
(Invitation to the table of Communion)