### “With All Your Heart” Steve Finlan for The First Church, November 3, 2024

**Deuteronomy 6:4–6**

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. 5You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

**Mark 12:28–34**

28One of the scribes . . . 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 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 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.

We’re going to talk about love today. I know you all have people you love warmly, intensely, closely, and some loved ones you have lost, too. Love fills your life, doesn’t it? Whether it makes you feel high or just feel warm and secure, love gives meaning. Love is the reason.

Have you ever wondered what Jesus was thinking when he gave the great commandment, the dual love commandment? He was drawing out the best in Judaism’s principles, and quoting two Torah passages to do so. The love-God passage comes from Deuteronomy 6, and the love-your-neighbor passage comes from Leviticus 19. He always used Scripture, whenever he could, to promote his teachings. Sometimes he had something new to say, for which there was no scriptural background, like his “render to Caesar” saying (Matt 22:21), or the remark “first clean the inside of the cup” (Matt 23:26), or the “kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21 Geneva Bible and NIV, 1978). There is plenty of originality in Jesus’ teaching, but he also draws on the best of the Old Testament. He knew that this would reach his listeners, who loved to hear an intelligent reflection on the Hebrew Scriptures.

I find it interesting that Deuteronomy has three love instructions, but Jesus adds a fourth, to love God with “all your mind” (Mark 12:30). For someone who believes in study and learning, that’s a commandment I like to hear. Another thing that’s interesting is that Deuteronomy repeats this commandment in different forms several times. Deuteronomy 11 speaks of “loving the Lord your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul” (11:13). Deuteronomy 26 speaks of observing the statutes “with all your heart and with all your soul” (26:16), and chapter 30 says “obey him with all your heart and with all your soul” (30:2). So this wording is a central theme for that author.

It’s a central teaching for Jesus, too, although he puts just as much emphasis on loving one’s neighbor as oneself. And near the end of his life he had the very difficult task of showing love for people who were killing him. There was not very much he could *do* in that regard, but at one point, recorded in John 18, he tried to reason with a temple guard who struck him, saying “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” (John 18:23). If the guard had had any conscience he would have felt shame after this. Jesus was appealing to the guard’s sense of justice, trying to reason with the bully.

Our experience unfortunately shows that this usually does not work. Once people start acting violently, they become moral cowards, and their conscience is stifled. We do not know what the result was in the guard’s case. But there *was* one person with whom this technique seems to have worked, the centurion at the cross, who, after Jesus’ death, said “Truly this man was God’s son” (Mark 15:39). *That* man, the centurion, had “ears to hear” (Mark 4:23). His life was changed by seeing Jesus’ behavior.

Most bullies cannot be reached this way. Of course, we don’t really know if this centurion was a bully; but he had to supervise crucifixions, so he might have been. He certainly was expected to impose violence upon subject populations when ordered to do so, and yet he was spiritually perceptive enough to be greatly impressed by Jesus.

As for a demonstration of love by Jesus, I can’t think of a greater one than his remarkable plea of forgiveness from the cross, when he said “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). It is an extraordinary act of generosity and understanding, perceiving that most of the participants in the crucifixion were profoundly ignorant. They had no idea who it was they were mistreating and killing. They were caught up in the violent demonstration of power, doing what was approved of by the empire. They did not think they were doing wrong.

Throughout his life, Jesus practiced what he preached. Some people observed his behavior and were enormously impressed. Others were cynical and dismissive. It may be that there is even more cynicism and dismissiveness in today’s world. Now, what can we do about that? We can’t force people to be sensitive and respectful, or make them learn life lessons. We can follow in our *own* lives the instructions we have received, and we can attempt to persuade others to follow in this path. Some day there will be a resurgence of faithfulness and sincerity. It has happened before, and it will happen again. In that day, “righteousness and praise will spring up before all the nations” (Isa 61:11). God will destroy “the shroud that is cast over all peoples” (Isa 25:7).

We are not yet at that place. But we can work our way towards it by being loyal and receptive to Jesus’ Spirit in our lives. We can do our part. It may seem small, but our lives and our choices are really very valuable, valued by God. Our behavior, especially the way we treat others, not only reflects onto us but outwards onto others, and people do notice our acts of kindness. Take heart and let your kindness ripple out to the world.

Imagine Jesus saying, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). He was graciously acknowledging the worthy insight of the scribe who said that the love commandment is greater than all burnt offerings. But he is also implying that the scribe needs to go a little further, to actually be fully *in* the kingdom of God. How could he be *in* the kingdom of God? The scribe needed to put love into practice, and to really trust in God’s love. Such trust gets you into the kingdom.

A woman named Jennie Hall tells the story of when her husband had to spend eleven days in a hospital after having surgery to cut out his tongue cancer. The overworked nurses tried their best but they made promises they couldn’t fulfill, such as promising to give him a sponge bath. By the eleventh day Jennie was angry and decided to give him a sponge bath herself. She put a “Do not disturb” sign on the door and proceeded to sponge every inch of Erik’s body, starting with the face where there were sixty four staples from his ear to his chin. As she was finishing her anger drained away, and she felt gratitude for the husband she loved. She was crying. She looked up and saw that Erik was crying, too. Around the feeding tube in his mouth, he mouthed the words “I love you.” She finished up, and crawled into bed next to him, lying her head on his chest and listening to her favorite sound: his heartbeat (*Devotional Stories of Resilience and Positive Thinking*, 221–22).

Whatever circumstances deal out to you, may you have a chance to show love, as Jennie did.