***“No Other Commandment”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, October 31, 2021

**Deuteronomy 6:4–9**

4Hear, 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. 7Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, 9and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

**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.

How do you find out information? If you are like me, you ask around, read up, take notes, and compare. In Jesus’ day, information about religion and religious discussions was common. In almost every town you could go to the local Pharisees or scribes and ask a question.

Jesus interacted with the scribes and Pharisees frequently. The Pharisees were not priests, but were a widespread and important religious party that was rigorous about observance of the Torah, both the written Torah and their traditions about an oral Torah. The scribes were not just secretaries, but clerks who recorded Pharisaic debates and decisions. In talking with a scribe, Jesus is talking with a religious intellectual.

Jesus’ saying about the greatest commandment is actually a combination of two sayings, one from Deuteronomy 6, and one about loving your neighbor as yourself from Lev 19:18. The question might have been intended to get him in trouble, by forcing him to choose one of the Ten Commandments over the rest, which would get him a lot of criticism. Instead, he chose two commandments outside the Ten, both of which focus on love. He makes a new supreme commandment that sums up the Ten Commandments. The scribe comes around and affirms Jesus’ choice, and does it by paraphrasing Jesus’ remark, and then adds an allusion to 1 Sam 15:22 (“this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices”), one of many sayings from the early prophets who questioned the value of the sacrificial cult.

Jesus strongly affirms the scribe’s valuing of love above sacrifice. This could also be seen as affirming moral and spiritual values above ritual practices. This is probably what the prophet Samuel intended in the first place. We see the same priority in Hosea’s saying “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6) or Isaiah’s “bringing offerings is futile . . . Cease to do evil, learn to do good . . . defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa 1:13, 16–17). Jesus quotes the Hosea passage twice in the Gospel of Matthew. Many times, Jesus affirms the prophetic emphasis upon spirituality and ethics. Here, following the fellow’s quoting of the prophet Samuel, Jesus affirms that he is not far from the kingdom of God.

Loyalty to supreme values like love or goodness is more important than outward conformity to any ritual system. Ritual action does not necessarily equate to ethical behavior. Ritual actions may have psychological benefits for their practitioners, but they may be weak in philosophic meaning, or be merely transactional—“one and done”—with little emotional, mental, or spiritual effort. One’s moral and philosophic values are more important than one’s level of conformity to an established ritual.

There are other places where Jesus affirms prophetic values. In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses a quote from Isaiah to affirm that the Father is drawing people to him, “and they shall all be taught by God” (John 6:45; Isa 54:13). This brief passage summarizes much of what the prophets were seeking: that people should allow themselves to be directly instructed by God. Amos calls God “the one who . . . reveals his thoughts to mortals” (4:13). This means you don’t have to ask someone to act as a go-between, to communicate with God. Your own desire to seek God is enough.

Of course, it takes a lot of gumption and confidence to believe that one is discerning God’s thoughts and God’s way. A prophet dares to do it, but so does a lunatic. An ordinary person might hesitate to claim that he can know the mind of God; he might rather seek to follow the advice of a recognized spokesman, a priest, a prophet, or a minister, but there, you are following someone else’s interpretation. The fact is, people have to use their reason and their intuition, and cultivate their ability to detect truth, and also an ability to resist the influence of unhealthy or imbalanced minds. Paul speaks of the gift of “the discernment of spirits” (1 Cor 12:10).

We must practice wise discernment to guard against anyone’s egotism, including our own. Having done that, we should practice robust faith that we shall be taught by God. We should have confidence that we are following God’s will, and that we can accept correction and deeper understanding when they come to improve our path to God.

“If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (James 1:5). That is love, too: God is eager to guide and to bless us. God seeks us out; we only need to open the door.

It is gratitude for God’s love that moves us to practice love. The more we believe in God’s love, the easier it becomes to devote heart and mind and strength to embodying that love and making it direct our lives.

Let’s return to the scribe’s comment “there is no other commandment greater than these” (12:31). These commandments sum up our highest aspiration and holiest hope: to love God wholly, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Judy Esway-Cugino is a hospital chaplain in Arizona. She tells the story of how she visited a wife whose husband had just died. As soon as the woman heard the word “chaplain,” she yelled at her, “Get the hell out of here and take your God with you!” Judy said “No, no. This is not about God. I don’t want you to be alone.” The woman glared at her for a second, allowed her to take a seat, and then poured out all her grief and her experiences for hours. Judy writes, “So, of course, it was about God, but she didn’t have to know that. God used me to provide an empathetic, non-judgmental, loving presence to a distraught woman whose life had just been turned upside down. That’s how God works. Anonymously, at times. Maybe most times.” (https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/soul-seeing/what-i-am-learning-gods-first-bible) I think her active listening, devoid of any preaching at all, was a real act of love.

First we have to accept that God loves *us* personally. We have to have some normal and healthy self-love—that is, self-respect—before we can love our neighbor as ourself. We receive compassion into our heart, and we resolve to practice compassion to those around us. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan shows us that everyone is our neighbor, and anyone can act neighborly, even the member of a despised ethnic group, like a Samaritan.

Don’t let the words of Jesus just stay printed in the Bible, let them take wing in your own life. Write a thank you note to someone. Visit someone who lives alone. Offer a non-judgmental ear to someone who needs to grieve. Help a refugee family that is trying to settle in to a new home in America. There are many opportunities to serve our neighbors. Let’s open up to God and ask for ways that we can help.

How will you start the conversation with God? Will you open your heart and mind to the love that comes from God and from Jesus, our brother and the revealer of God?