

Message Manuscript for “They Know What Matters Most” Mark 12:28-34
Series: 5 Best Practices of Followers of Jesus
Delivered to Church for the Highlands
Sunday, November 1, 2015

You may have noticed the big green army tent out on the parking lot this past week. Mike McCrary arranged for us to borrow it from the National Guard for Maggie Lee for Good Sock Stock on Thursday and for the CARnival on Saturday. If you saw it and if you went inside you noticed that it was no ordinary tent. Its poles, pegs, material, and design were developed by the Army to endure rapid mobilization, extremes of weather conditions, battle, and the wear and tear from well-meaning but highly uncoordinated volunteers like myself. This last one was tested on Thursday as we, with the help of Mike, Patty, and other professional soldiers, gathered a few volunteers to put up the tent. Mike commented how putting up a tent is a great exercise in leadership, as it could only be done properly when people were working together. Giving a group of soldiers the task of putting one up without any instruction would require someone taking charge, defining the end goal (what mattered the most), and determining what steps were necessary to make it work. At any given time in the process, we all needed to hear what mattered most—the stability of the overall structure. Whatever else we might have done would have made us look busy and effective, but not if we weren’t doing what mattered most—working together.

When a scribe approached Jesus with a question about what mattered most, he was giving Jesus a test to see how he would respond. It could be that he wanted him to fail. Or, it could be that what Jesus was teaching and doing was attracting him and he had a checklist of things he would have to know about a teacher before following him. He was, after all, a scribe, someone who specialized in God’s law and would have been quite meticulous and precise in how things were done and said. Whatever the case, it was a test, and it came in the form of a question, “Teacher, which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus, who was already in the heat of conversation with another scribe and doing quite well with his answers, replies to the scribe simply what all Jews would know from lessons as a child, from what was written on their doorposts and phylacteries, and from what they would recite at the start of each day. It was the Shema, "The first is, '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.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." That was it. That's all that Jesus said. It was all he needed to say, since it linked together two inextricable things God wanted from the world: a relationship without idolatry, love. God wanted to have a relationship of love with humankind, desiring love from the totality of their being. The way this would happen, as Jesus would always so perfectly display, was by loving one's neighbor. True love for God would be shown by true love for neighbor. Temple worship and all the sacrifices that went with it for God were important, but Jesus knew that all of their religious practices mattered less to God than loving God and neighbor.

And the scribe agreed! This is no small thing, given that many of the scribes were very much out to get Jesus, making traps for him to fall into and wanting him and his teaching to go away as soon as possible. Not so, however, with this scribe. There was something different about him. Something was happening in him, something he was open to pursuing further as he followed Jesus and approached him with his question. He seems to be the kind of person who is not satisfied with stock religious answers, black and white interpretation of the Law, or with judgments about Jesus without first hearing him out. He was a seeker of truth, one who was in active pursuit of it and getting quite close, so close Jesus would tell him that he was "not far from the kingdom of God." What a compliment from one who knows what and where that is!

As followers of Jesus today, we are to know what matters most to God. What would we say to the scribe if he were to approach us with his test question about what is the most important commandment for us? What would you say? You and I might quickly mention prayer, reading the Bible, or going to church. Perhaps our answer might be in the form of listing all of the things we aren't supposed to be doing; that what's most important for followers of Jesus is making sure we don't break the commandments. We can get pretty good at this last one, as good as the scribes of Jesus's day. And getting good at it means that we get really legalistic about our relationship with God, developing a whole system of things we think matter most to God when in reality matter least. If loving God and neighbor are the most important things to God then why do we get so hung up on what matters the least? Do we really think we are loving God with

our worship services, Bible studies, religious meetings, and doctrines if there are people around us we have chosen not to love? According to Jesus, these things still matter, but they don't matter the most. Do we really think God cares more about the time we spend inside the church walls managing our religion than what we can be doing to help transform the neighborhood and community outside the walls? Do we really think God is impressed with our order of worship when we ignore the disorder of our world? If we do, then we aren't yet close to the "kingdom of God." Unlike the scribe, we aren't getting to what matters most.

We have Mary Van Rheenen and Keith Holmes here with us today. They are CBF Field Personnel in the Netherlands, working from there as missionaries with the Romany people. They have lived there since 1996, translating the Bible into the 20 different Romany languages and working in places like Moldova, the poorest country in Europe to provide education and micro-economic development. As you will hear in just a bit, they are examples of followers of Jesus who do what matters most, loving God and neighbor.

So if we know what matters most to God, what does it look like for us to do what matters most, for us to be "not far from the kingdom of God"? It will become evident in how we renew our fidelity to the Lord who is One, disavowing our love for other gods in our lives. This fidelity of love will be comprehensive and holistic, involving every ounce of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. And it will be so intertwined with our love for our neighbors that it will no longer be possible to tell where one ends and the other begins. We will not be able to sing hymns, give offerings, and take communion without thinking of issues that affect our neighborhood like poverty, healthcare, education, climate change, and racism. Doing what matters most as followers of Jesus will become apparent in our neighborhoods, where amazing things happen in communities—like at big parties we throw for our neighbors on Halloween, the doing of good deeds for our neighbors on Maggie Lee for Good Day, dining with 125 of our neighbors each week at the Highland Blessing Dinner, and providing a place of care for those neighbors of ours who have severe mental illness--where people understand and do what matters most to God.