

"Shema"

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

November 3, 2024, All Saints Sunday

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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Listen up! Pay attention! We've heard it as children from parents; as part of sports teams from coaches or in classrooms from teachers; sometimes even from pastors! What does it take to truly hear?

The title of this message, "Shema," is the Hebrew word "Hear." In today's Gospel, Jesus is in the midst of a religious debate with the scribes, teachers of the Hebrew law. No slouch in such matters, Jesus does such a good job in this debate (captured in the preceding verses) that one of the scribes asks Jesus, in so many words, *"Jesus, out of all this religious talk, legal-ese and the 613 laws of our scripture, which is the most important?"*

Answering, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This passage is written on a scroll and carried about by especially religious Jews; and is represented in the mezuzah that is on the doorpost of Orthodox and some Conservative Jewish homes. It declares:

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.

In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible entitled The Message, he renders it *"Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy!"*

Yet Jesus does not stop there. Maybe he's just a preacher needing one final thought; indulging preacher's tendency to say, *"Well, on the one hand...but then, on the other hand..."* Regardless of the reason, Jesus expands on the answer with another verses from Leviticus 19:18, one that you heard read at our 200th Anniversary celebration just two weeks ago:

"The second [law] is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

So what does it take to hear? Love. Whether directed to heaven or earth, love is the common denominator. And not just any love. Love that

yearns for God and for the well-being of others, and in the context of a healthy self-love. If you're hearing an echo from my last two sermons, it's not an accident.

You see, too often our loves omit one of these partners. We get too busy for God. We neglect prayer, reading scripture, or public and private worship. We become so absorbed with self that we neglect neighbor, whether across the world or across the room. Or we become "*weary in well-doing*" {to quote St. Paul} and fail to truly love ourselves. I recently said to someone, "*No one will take care of your health but you.*" They love others and others love them. But other priorities, even well-intended ones on behalf of others, have crowded out self-care and put their overall health at risk. This is the flight attendant's speech, right? "*Put your own air mask on first.*" It's why we offer free blood-pressure screenings, as a check - in addition to regular medical check-ups - on this vital health marker.

So in this religious argument, Jesus says explicitly what we know intuitively: Clean your ears out! Pay attention! Hear! If we don't love God, neighbor and self, life and faith are unbalanced.

But there's good news! Being here - whether in person or on-line - shows we're on it. Self-reflection on these matters is part of what Sunday worship is about. So is redirection. The scribe in Mark's story summarized what Jesus said and then added his own observation: "*It is more important than all offerings and sacrifices.*" Wow! More than church committees? The Food Bank? Our emphasis on "testimony?" Our mission work at home and abroad? Well, yes. If these and other ministries are undertaken only for their sacrifice and not for love, we have missed the renewing power of God. So insightful was the scribe that Jesus said of him, "*You are not far from the Kingdom of God.*"

There is a teaching technique that invites us to imagine ourselves as a character in scripture, hearing it from their vantage point. I used this practice in preparing this sermon, perhaps not co-incidentally on All Saints Day. I imagined that I was the scribe; that for once I "got it;" that my life was in balance; and that the love I desire daily but manage to give and receive less often was truly and fully there. I felt an overwhelming sense of peace. Later, praying the Lord's Prayer and coming to the phrase "*Thy*

kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven" I felt Jesus' mysterious assurance: *"You are not far from the Kingdom of God."*

Still, loving God, self and neighbor can create a trinity of competition. Sometimes we must put love of self before others. Sometimes we love others first. Sometimes multiple claims for priority of time and effort must be settled, and not all are pleased with the settlement. Sometimes loving and trusting God means letting go of outcomes. Sometimes we hold on to hope tightly; sometimes we must agree that "hope is the enemy of acceptance." These challenges are not easy and are as varied as we are. The struggle is real. Welcome to the journey of discipleship.

A final thought. The debate in Mark's story was not a private matter. Neither is our faith. Like the scribe's insight, our faith is public. Do you know that church weddings are public events? The reception is different but anyone can attend a church wedding. So, today, we are in this very public place about to make a very public statement by taking a very public Sacrament. Hearing God means remembering this public side of love.

Indeed, our faith is always on public display, whether we remember it or not. Consider George. He fumed as the driver before him did not move when the light changed to "green." And when it changed back to red and to green again. George swore. He gestured. He beat on the steering wheel. But he stopped these antics when a police officer tapped on his window. Gun drawn.

"You can't arrest me for hollering in my car," said George. The officer responded by inviting George not to move his vehicle. After some radio exchanges, the officer returned to release George. *"See,"* George declared, *"I knew you couldn't arrest me for what I yelled in my own car."*

The officer said, *"Of course not.. I was directly behind you at the light. I saw your anger and thought 'What a jerk.' Then I noticed the cross hanging from your rearview mirror, the fish on the trunk lid and the 'Keep Christ in Christmas' car magnet. Naturally, I thought you stole the car from a Christian."*

Hear, O Woodbury: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and your neighbor as yourself. Amen.