Sunday, November 3, 1991
PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST
Mark 12:28-34

One day, I received a phone call from a stranger who said she was interested in discovering what I believed as a Christian minister. From the way she asked her questions, it seemed evident to me that she had some doubt as to whether or not I could be considered a Christian. After several preliminary questions, she asked, "If you were called to the bedside of a dying person who was not baptized and as far as you knew was not a member of any Christian church, what would you say to her?"

I think what she wanted me to say was something like, "Repent of your sins, be baptized, and accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior here and now before you die, and you will be saved." Instead, I gave an answer that was not satisfying to the caller but which I believe has the same meaning, only using different words. I said that I would assure the dying individual that God is above all a loving God and that God loves her and forgives her. Then I would ask her to let me pray with her as together we acknowledged and accepted God's forgiveness and love in both of our lives. I would be saying, in other words, believe and accept the fact that God loves you and cares for you. With that knowledge, you can die in peace.

This incident reminded me of the question which one of the Scribes asked Jesus one day, "Which commandment is the first of all? Which of all the many commandments is the most important to follow?" This was a question frequently pondered among the students of the sacred scriptures. Wouldn't it be convenient if it were possible to take all of the ancient laws and rank them from the most important down to the least? But that isn't the way it is. God's will for us is not a scale of good ideas from the greatest to the least.

Jesus knew the answer to the Scribe's question, so he replied, "The first commandment is this, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one; and 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."

A number of years ago in another sermon, I told about an old newspaper story in my files that I had forgotten was there. It was about an Episcopal minister named John Albrecht who entered the Guinness Book of World Records by standing before his congregation in Lake Orion, Michigan, and giving the shortest sermon on record.

He stood before them and after a brief silence uttered one word: "LOVE!" Then he sat down. That was it. No more. One of his members said it was his best sermon. Certainly, it must have taken some time to prepare. I have sometimes been told that "church would be nicer if sermons were conciser."

To tell the truth, I'm a bit envious of John Albrecht's innovative spirit. I've been trying to figure out how to come up with a one-word sermon to tie his record. Some possibilities that I've considered are: CARE; GIVE; HELP; FORGIVE. Those of you who know me very well also know that my one-word sermon would not be "SHARE." It is the most used and misused word in our language these days. If you were to give a one-word sermon, what would it be?

I remember another news story about a preacher who entered the Guinness Book of World Records for preaching the world's longest sermon — 60 hours and 31 minutes. It was reported that when he was near the end of that long sermon, a person in the audience shouted, "At least make the point!"

The more I've thought about it, I believe "LOVE" is the only one-word sermon that's appropriate. I'm aware that the word has its problems because it is abused and overused in so many ways. Julian Huxley had this to say about it, "Of all the worn, smudged, dog-eared words in our vocabulary, surely love is the grubbiest, smelliest, slimiest. Bawled from a million pulpits, it becomes an outrage to good feeling and decent taste, an obscenity that one hates to pronounce."

The word "love" is abused, and perhaps more in our time than in others. Advertisements tell us that love is running together through a meadow, lighting two cigarettes in the dark, or applying a deodorant daily.

But I am not ready to give up on the word "love" because it is abused. Love, in the Christian understanding of the word, is one of the most important, if not the most important, words in Christian theology.

A few examples from the Bible: "God so loved the world." "We love because God first loved us." "If I speak in the tongues of men and women or even angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.... Love never ends.... So faith, hope, love abide, but the greatest of these is love." "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God. Those who do not love do not know God; for God is love.... If we love one another, God abides in us and God's love is perfected in us." "If anyone says that he or she loves God and hates another human being, that person is a liar. For those who do not love their sisters and brothers in the human race whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

Love of God and neighbor is basic to all of life. Some years ago, an experienced counselor wrote a book entitled Love or Perish. In the introduction to the book, he said:

"For more than forty years, I have sat in my office and listened while people of all ages and classes told me of their hopes and fears, their likes and dislikes, and of what they considered good or bad about themselves and the world around them. I have listened while mature people tried to piece together the converging patterns of their troubled lives. I have listened while adolescents confided their secret resentments and anxieties, and while very young children told me by indirection where things were going wrong with them. I have listened too, while elderly people explained where they had failed, where they succeeded, and what hopes they cherished for the future."

"As I look back over the long, full years, one truth emerges clearly in my mind — the universal need for love. Whether they think they do or not, all people want love. They want to know someone cares for them. Their spoken words may tell of other things, but their need for love is evident in many ways. We cannot survive without love. We must have it or we will perish. Without love, we lose the will to live. Our mental and physical vitality is impaired, our resistance is lowered, and we succumb to illnesses that often prove fatal. We may escape actual death, but what remains is a meager and barren existence, emotionally so impoverished that we can only be called half-alive."

What this psychiatrist discovered through his psychotherapy, the Christian faith has been proclaiming for centuries. However, the Christian proclamation adds one very important ingredient: we know that in addition to our loving, God loves each one of us and all of us, and that God loves the whole creation. Love is God at work in the creation. It is the power and energy that hold the universe together. We experience this loving energy of God best when we love others and when others love us.

We say over and over again in this kind of church that the overall purpose for our existence as a church is the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor. That's our primary business. That's putting first things first. It's what we need to do in the church and in our individual lives.

Have you noticed that when we do not put first things first — that is, the love of God and the love of others — our lives get all out of alignment?

A man said to me, "I have two goals in life: (1) to make as much money as possible, and (2) to spend a lot of time with my family." What he didn't realize was that his goals were out of alignment with each other, and they pulled his whole life all out of shape.

You cannot love God and hate your neighbor. If you do this, your life is out of alignment. Or if you love others and do not properly love yourself at the same time, your life is out of alignment. "Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." That's putting first things first.

I've read a number of books on golf in an attempt to improve my game. They are filled with an almost endless number of good suggestions. However, the best advice I've come across from all of these experts is that of Jack Nicklaus because he puts first things first. If you ask him about the secret to good golfing, he does not say strength, or practice, or equipment, or grip — even though all of these are important. He begins with "alignment." In his book, Golf My Way, Nicklaus explains that 90 percent of a good golf shot is a matter of alignment... how you set up... how you start... how you choose to begin. Before you do anything else, check your alignment.

A man walked into an auto repair shop and saw a mechanic looking intently at a car that was lopsided. When he asked him what was the matter with it, the mechanic said, "It's all out of alignment, that is, it won't track. The front wheels will go up the middle of the road and the rear wheels do not follow in the same line." The man asked the mechanic, "What difference does that make except that the car will look a little funny as it's going down the highway?" The mechanic said, "It makes all the difference in the world as far as power is concerned. If the car is out of alignment, everything in it will be pulling against everything else. There will be a tug-of-war inside, and the power will be cut in half. Furthermore, being out of alignment adds stress and strain to the entire car so that it will wear out more quickly. The tires will also wear unevenly and not last as long."

Isn't it the same with our lives? I see people all the time whose lives are out of alignment so that one part of their life is pulling one way or working against another part of their life, and it adds tension and increases the wear and tear on the person. It's what we call extreme stress. People can also get out of alignment with God and with others. Check your alignment. Check your alignment on the personal goals in your life. Do they fit and complement one another? Or do they go in different directions? Are your goals in line with what you believe to be God's will for you? Having the proper alignment means putting first things first.

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself — that's the proper alignment. Love of God cannot be separated from the love of other human beings. Jesus said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

There was a young Swiss woman in her late teens named Ursula, who came to New York City to live in an American home and learn English in return for doing babysitting and other household tasks. She was an ordinary young woman, not the kind who lives her life pulling people from a crashed airplane or the kind who starts a great reform movement. Indeed, her act of love of God and others was extraordinarily simple. Not having much money herself but realizing the vast extent of poverty in New York City, she decided to buy a dress and give it to some child in the ghetto. At the department store, she asked the doorman what part of the city was the poorest, got directions from a police officer to Harlem, walked a number of blocks, and eventually found a bell-ringer from the Salvation Army who offered to help her find a little girl in need of a dress. Hailing a taxi, the two traveled on together until they came to a tenement house where the Salvation Army man knew of a poor family with a little girl. Ursula asked the man to take her package to the door, ring the bell, and then leave the anonymous gift. The next day, she hesitantly told the family with whom she was staying about the journey she had made.

The story deals with a very simple act of love. Amidst the vast squalor of New York City's slums, one little girl received a dress from an anonymous stranger. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, who originally told this story, added, "How do I know about this? I know it because ours was the home where Ursula lived. Strange, isn't it? A shy Swiss young woman, alone in a large impersonal city. You would think that nothing she could do would affect anyone. And yet by giving her love away, she influenced many people: herself, the Salvation Army man, the tenement family, the taxi driver, my own family, myself, and perhaps, through this retelling of her story, she will influence people all over the world."

Which is the first commandment? Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. That's putting first things first. Amen.