Sunday, November 9, 2003
THE PRIORITY OF LOVE
Mark 12:28-34

When I was a young child attending Sunday school and church, one of my favorite pictures in our Sunday school classroom showed Jesus with children of every color gathered around him. Some of you will remember that picture. We also learned a song that went with that picture, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world." This song made a lasting impression on me, even though in my Sunday school classroom, all of us were children with predominantly light complexions.

Because of this picture and the song, I found Jesus easy to accept as a child. He loves all the children of the world. Our teacher also reminded us that Jesus came among us to show that God loves all the children of the world in the same way.

Later on, when I was a teenager and began to read some of the other stories in the Bible, I started to have some strong doubts about the character of God. I discovered a story in the book of Joshua where the Israelites kill every man, woman, and child in the towns of Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir. This was terrible enough, but what shocked me even more was the reason the Bible gave for the killing: "Joshua left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded" (Joshua 10:40).

This didn't sound like the God that Jesus revealed. When I would question this action of God, I was given unsatisfying reasons. One teacher said God was doing these children a favor since they would have grown up in an evil culture and eventually ended up in hell. Then I found other passages in the Bible that implied these children and adults would have ended up in hell anyway because they didn't have the right beliefs.

Another teacher said that maybe God ordered this massacre of all men, women, and children to protect the people of Israel from the evil that would have come through intermarriage with pagans. Then I wondered why such intermarriage would be evil if it was true, as the Bible taught, that all human beings are created in God's image.

Still another teacher told me not to ask such questions. "The ways of God are mysterious," she said. That too was not very helpful. Then I thought maybe this teacher found this violent image of God hard to believe but, at the same time, she couldn't overcome her belief that all of the words and stories in the Bible are equally true.

As I continued to grow and mature in my faith, to experience the grace and love of God in my life, and the more I studied the Bible and how it came to be the Bible, and the more I studied what Biblical scholars had discovered, I began to learn how to evaluate Bible stories. Some Bible stories and teachings more accurately portray God's character than others.

One Biblical scholar wrote: "If all Scripture is equally inspired and authoritative, God is as likely to swallow us up in an earthquake or drown us in a flood as God is to forgive our sin and take us into his arms. The reported behavior of God in the Bible is erratic at best and nearly schizophrenic in some instances. God rescues the Jewish people from the oppression of Egypt in one chapter, and a few chapters later, has to be convinced by Moses not to destroy them."

Learning how to evaluate Bible stories and teachings allows for the possibility that some descriptions of God and God's behavior are inaccurate. This brings us to the story in Mark's gospel, where Jesus is asked, "Which commandment is the first of all?" If Jesus had believed all Scriptures were of equal worth, he would have answered, "All the commandments are equally important." Instead, he replied, "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."

Incidentally, this same story is also included in Matthew and Luke. You will remember that in Luke's gospel, after hearing what Jesus said about love of neighbor, a lawyer asked him, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered by telling the story of the Good Samaritan, which teaches that even people you consider your enemies are your neighbors.

In Matthew's version of this same story, an important comment by Jesus is added. He said, "All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments of love of God and neighbor." In other words, these teachings exalting love are as heavy as the rest of the Bible.

The love of God, God's love for us, and the creation is the central teaching of the Bible. Paul wrote, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:14) Years later, St. Augustine wrote: "Love God and do as you please."

According to Mark's gospel, even the scribe, the Bible scholar of his day who asked Jesus the question, agreed with the answer Jesus gave. He said, "You are right, teacher." He knew that the commandment of love of God and neighbor, and the fact that God loves all of us equally, has the highest priority of all the teachings in the scriptures. It is the lens through which all scripture needs to be evaluated.

The priority of God's love, God's grace, means that I cannot accept Joshua's claim that God commanded him to kill all the men, women, and children in Canaan. A God of love doesn't murder his children or ask you to do so. A God who has commanded me to love my neighbor doesn't demand that I kill that same neighbor.

Using the priority of love as a way to evaluate scripture has allowed me to avoid the all-or-nothing approach to the Bible so prevalent in Christianity today. I sometimes hear people say, "If there is one error in the Bible, how can one trust any of it?" I cannot accept this statement. It suggests the only choices are uncritical acceptance or complete rejection. To reject the Bible completely is to miss its central proclamation of God's love, but if I accept it uncritically, then I am accepting some ugly ideas about God. For example, the Bible has God demanding the death of those who curse their parents, those who commit adultery, and those who practice homosexuality. (Leviticus 20:9-10, 13)

Why then did Joshua say God commanded him to murder every man, woman, and child? I believe Joshua didn't understand the character of God very well. That's true of many of the people in the Bible and also true of many of us today. These Biblical figures contributed some valuable insights from their experiences with God and helped lay the foundation for a fuller revelation of God's character. I believe the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was this fuller revelation.

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 in which she asked her questions, I wondered if she had some doubt as to whether or not I would be considered a Christian. After

several preliminary questions, she asked, “If you were called to the bedside of a dying person who could no longer speak, but could hear you, and who was not a member of a Christian church and therefore was not baptized, and as far as you knew, this person was not a believer, what would you say to her as she was dying?”

I told her that I would do my best to assure the person who was dying that God is a God of love and that God loves her and forgives her. Then I would take the person’s hand in mine, and we would pray together. In that prayer, I would thank God for God’s grace and forgiveness. Then, while still holding her hand, I would recite the 23rd Psalm.

Whether or not my answer was satisfying to the woman on the phone, I do not know. She thanked me for talking with her, and we said goodbye.

When Jesus said the first and foremost commandment is “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself,” he was also saying that God has no commitment greater than love. Everything God does, God does because of love. The Bible doesn’t say God can be loving, or God is often loving, or even God is usually loving. It says God is love.

I believe love is the most important word in Christian theology. Here are some more examples from the Bible: “God so loved the world.” “We love because God first loved us.” “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ... Love never ends ... so faith, hope, and 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 he or she loves God and hates another human being, that person is a liar.”

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 wrote:

“For more than 40 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 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 counselor discovered through his experience, the Christian faith has been proclaiming since its beginning. However, the Christian proclamation adds one very important ingredient. We know that in addition to our loving others, God loves each one of us and all of us, and that God loves the whole creation. Love is God at work in creation. It is the power and energy that holds the universe together. We experience this loving energy of God most powerfully when we love others, and others love us.

Jesus demonstrated this all-embracing love. He healed lepers. He comforted prostitutes. He ate with tax collectors. He forgave sinners. Those whom the world despised, he befriended. He died with love on his lips—"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

You've heard it said over and over again in this congregation that the overall purpose for the existence of the church is the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor. That's our mission statement. That's our primary business. Love is the priority.

You've probably noticed that when you do not make love of God and neighbor your highest priority, your life begins to get out of alignment. A man said to me, "I have two goals in life: (1) to make as much money as possible; (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 out of shape.

You cannot love God and hate another person at the same time. If you try to do this, your life is out of alignment. Or if you love others and do not properly love yourself, your life is out of alignment. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself, and your life will be in proper alignment.

I want to conclude this sermon as I began it — with a very personal testimony. The more I experience the love of God, the more I realize that this love surpasses knowledge. God's love is wide enough to include us all. It is long enough to last through eternity. It is higher and deeper than any human love you have known. It reaches into the deepest hell and redeems the lost.

Amen.