

SERMON TITLE: “Seek Peace Through Love”

TEXT: Mark 12:28-34

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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DATE: July 22, 2012/8th Sunday After Pentecost

I want to begin with a familiar thought experiment.

If you woke up to discover that your house was on fire, and you had only a few minutes to grab what was most important to you before escaping the inferno, what would you take (for the sake of argument, we will assume that all of the *people* in the house are safe ☺)?

- Bible?
- Computer or smart phone?
- Photo albums?
- Prized family heirlooms?
- An expensive musical instrument or camera or piece of sports equipment?
- Books (this may become an increasingly irrelevant option given the proliferation of e-readers!)?

Or, perhaps we could consider a less hypothetical example. Suppose you had lived in one city or one house for a very long time, and were about to downsize and move to a new location. What do you bring with you? What do you leave behind?

Our family has moved four times in the last seven years or so, and each time it has been striking to notice just *how much* of what we accumulated at each stop could be left behind!

However we might respond to these hypothetical situations, they invite us to reflect upon the question of *what we could not do without*.

Amidst all of the clutter of our lives, what are the non-negotiables that we *need* in order to root and ground our memory and identity, our hopes and aspirations, our security and our prospects for the future?

What are the essentials?

Of course, it’s not just in the realm of material possessions that we wonder about essentials. We do this with our religious convictions as well.

As we are well aware, our twenty-first century postmodern world is characterized by a sometimes-bewildering array of religious and ideological options, often co-existing in close geographic proximity with one another.

This is the case across Canada to varying degrees, but I was reminded of this reality again during our travels in the Vancouver area over the last few weeks for holidays and for the

Mennonite Church Canada Assembly. Vancouver is a city characterized by a high degree of every kind of diversity.

Things don't look quite the same here in southern AB, but like most parts of Canada our community is becoming more ethnically and religiously diverse. This is our culture. This is our context.

And in the context of this diversity, where we often find ourselves relating to people with different religious beliefs than us, many of us find ourselves performing a similar kind of inventory with our beliefs to the one we imagined doing with our possessions in the earlier thought experiment.

What are the essentials of my faith? What can I not do without?

And, more positively, what is the common ground that I share with people of other perspectives?

The same is true within the broad Christian family and, more specifically still, within our own Mennonite Church Canada.

It was very evident at the Assembly was that even within MC Canada, there is a diversity of opinions when it comes to how our faith should be understood and implemented, about how we ought to interpret Scripture and about the ethical implications of how we read the Bible.

So, whether *across* religions or *within* religions, we have diversity.

And when faced with this diversity, we want to know: *what is most important?* Even if we disagree about the stuff on the edges, what is the core of our faith that we need to be sure about. What ought we to prioritize?

What is the foundation upon which the edifice of our faith is constructed?

Our conversation between Jesus and the scribe in Mark's gospel deals with this question of essentials.

The scribe asks Jesus, in plain language, "Which commandment is first of all?" It is obvious that he is not asking a question of chronology but of significance.

There were many competing interpretations of the Jewish law at the time—the Scribes and Pharisees had taken legal wrangling and arguing about the fine points of the Law to some fairly extreme lengths.

In the context of all of this squabbling and diversity, the scribe wants to know. What is the bottom line? What is *most* important?

Jesus' response is well known: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

Jesus then adds another: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Together, these are often referred to as "The Great Commandment."

We talked earlier about "essentials" in a religiously diverse cultural context. What can we learn from how Jesus approaches the question of essentials?

It is important to note that in answering the scribe, Jesus does not appeal to some kind of rational "first principle" but to a *story*. *Israel's* story, in particular.

Our first Scripture reading this morning from the book of Deuteronomy contains what faithful Jews refer to as the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart..."

These words were and *are* recited in the synagogue and households across Israel daily. They are a statement of identity, the reminder of a covenant between God and his people, and a call to a devotion to God that involves every aspect of their being.

Jesus goes on...

The scribe asked for the "first" commandment, but he got the first two because Jesus adds, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

Again, Jesus appeals to Israel's story and Israel's Scriptures in his response. The OT book of Leviticus does not rank very highly on most people's list of "inspirational books of the Bible," but the "love your neighbour" command is taken from Leviticus 19:18 which comes in a much longer passage about how the community of Israel was to order their common life.

Jesus places his teaching and his actions within the ongoing story of God's dealings with and promises to the nation of Israel.

On one level, this ought not to surprise us. After all, Jesus was a Jew, and was in conversation with an observant Jew, and was asked a question about the Jewish law.

But I think it is a good reminder to us, who live two thousand or so years later and in a cultural context very different from that of first century Israel.

It is tempting—especially in religiously diverse, postmodern West—to recast Jesus as a kind of generic religious guru who came to impart universal morals and truths, or to provide one option among many at the religious smorgasbord of the postmodern world.

There is *some* truth to this. There is a sense in which Jesus' response to the scribe *does* reflect a universal truth that goes beyond Christianity.

For example, C.S. Lewis, in a little book called *The Abolition of Man*, argues that the command to love our neighbour is part of a generic human moral imperative that is at least partially expressed in all religious traditions and even secular atheism. Lewis calls this "the Tao" or "the Way in which the Universe goes."¹

As Christians, this should not surprise us. We believe that every human being is made in God's image and has God's law written on all of our hearts (as the Apostle Paul reminds us in the first two chapters of Romans). It should not surprise us to find that Jesus' ethic of love is expressed in various ways across time and across human culture and religion.

And yet... Jesus will not be squeezed into our mold.

Jesus is stubbornly Jewish—he is the fulfillment of a very specific story that centers on a very specific people with a very specific understanding of who God, who they are, and what God requires.

Returning to the text, this time to the scribe's response to Jesus...

First, the scribe expresses his agreement with Jesus' response, using language from Deuteronomy.

So far so good. At first glance, this exercise seems to be just a reaffirmation of the centrality of love of God and neighbour in Israel's law.

But the scribe goes on to say that *the love of God and neighbour "is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices"* (Mark 12:33).

When we look at the context, we begin to see the significance of this statement.

It is hugely significant that, in Mark's gospel, this conversation about essentials between Jesus and the scribe takes place in the broader context of controversies with religious leaders and, specifically, Jesus' driving the moneychangers out of the Temple.

Throughout the Gospels we read of Jesus challenging and defying the laws about Sabbath-keeping, ritual purity, and forgiveness and healing.

In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus' words about The Great Commandment are followed by his angry denunciations of the scribes and Pharisees, and his prediction of the

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 1944), 18.

destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (and, implicitly, the entire religious system the Temple stood for!).

Throughout his ministry, Jesus found himself at odds with the Israel's religious gatekeepers. At stake in Jesus' prickly relations with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes was the question: **who speaks for God?**

Who interprets Israel's story correctly? The guarders and preservers of Israel's traditions or this irreverent prophet of questionable origins who dines with unclean whores and thieves, and who claims divine authority and stirs up trouble wherever he goes?

The answer—clearly implied by the scribe in our text—is that it is Jesus, not the religious authorities, who speaks for God. It is Jesus, not the Temple that is where God is accessed.

It is *love*, and not the elaborate edifice of rituals and sacrifices and regulations that had accumulated over the centuries, that most clearly expressed the heart and purposes of God for his people and for his world.

And it is Jesus who will demonstrate what this love—for God and neighbour, friend and enemy, insider and outsider—looks like on a Roman cross less than a week later.

We begin to see that there is a lot going on in the Great Commandment.

Jesus was not offering a generic universal ethic—although his response to the scribe stands in continuity with the broader story of Israel and the even *broader* story of creation and what human beings were made to be and do to reflect God's image.

Beyond these things, Jesus' response was a highly subversive challenge to Israel's temple culture, a hugely significant statement of his own identity and purpose, as well as a profound return to the true spirit of Israel's law: love of God and love of neighbour.

So, what does this have to do with seeking peace and pursuing it?

Well, on an obvious level, love is a precondition for true peace.

The kind of love Jesus has in mind, the kind of love Jesus modeled in life and death, the kind of love we read about throughout Scripture is *not* the love that we hear and see in the songs and the films of popular culture.

It is not a fleeting emotion. It is not something that *happens to us*—something that we fall in and out of, regardless of what we might expect or desire.

In Scripture love is a choice. It is a choice to pursue the good of the other. The Greek word *agápē* connotes genuine, concern, fidelity, generosity, selflessness.... It involves a genuine attempt to feel and act *for* and *with* others.

These are the building blocks of true and lasting peace, whether on the level of individuals, families, and churches, or at the larger levels of denominations, religious traditions, ethnic groups, and nations.

We cannot claim to be pursuing peace if we do not see the humanity in our neighbour—even, or especially, the neighbour we are least inclined to love, as Jesus makes clear throughout the gospels (for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan which, incidentally comes right after the Great Commandment in Luke's account of today's text).

Whether in our interactions with people of different faiths, or with people who understand our own Anabaptist convictions differently, or with anyone at all, we are called to something both profoundly simple and profoundly difficult.

Love. Love God. Love your neighbour. Love God by loving your neighbour. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

These are the essentials of what it means to follow Jesus. These are what we take from the burning building.

These are what we cannot do without.

This doesn't mean that we ignore things like doctrine, or that we ought never to make distinctions between differing beliefs, or that we should stay away from difficult issues and "just love each other." This is neither possible nor desirable.

Jesus loved the religious elites of first century Israel, but part of how this love was expressed involved telling the truth and exposing their hypocrisy.

Sometimes loving people involves helping them to see their errors, or areas where they might want to reconsider this or that.

It also means being willing to admit that *we* might be wrong, and that people from other perspectives might have something to teach *us*!

It means that we ought to examine ourselves—as individual Christians, as Mennonites—and ask if there are areas in our life where we, like some in first century Israel, have allowed a religious or cultural system to take priority over love of God and neighbour.

But in everything we do, we are to be guided by a genuine concern *for* and commitment *to* the good of others. We are to look at them like God does—as human beings who are dearly loved and who bears God's image, just like us.

This is the only sure foundation for true and lasting peace.

When we do this—when we love God with all of who we are, with our time and our talents, our brains and our emotions, and our hands and feet—we demonstrate that we are, as Jesus said to the scribe, “not far from the kingdom of God.”

To quote Tim Geddert, in his commentary on Mark, we are “positioned *near* God’s kingdom when priorities are correctly set.”²

May God sustain and strengthen us as we seek peace through love—as we accept and practice Jesus’ priorities on our journey into living into the kingdom of God.

Amen.

² Timothy J. Geddert, *Mark: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 291.