

# Keep These Words

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

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Apparently, the average person apparently reads 10-12 books a year. When you factor in reading online, advertising, directions, etc., most of us roll our eyes over a few thousand words every day. We are awash in words.

I write, on average one sermon 2-3 blog posts and one sermon every week. So that's about five thousand words that I contribute to the world every week. 😊

In the midst of all these words, it's easy for words to come to seem pretty cheap and disposable.

But every once in a while, I have this experience where I read a sentence and it just stops me in my tracks and lodges itself in my brain, forcing me to stop and really reckon with it. Maybe this happens to you, too?

It happened to me on Thursday evening.

A new book from one of my favourite authors had arrived in the mail. Christian Wiman is a poet who teaches literature at Yale Divinity School. He's also negotiating life in the aftermath of a rare form cancer. He was diagnosed, I believe, in his late thirties. His cancer is currently in remission, but it is uncertain what the future will hold.

His new book is called *He Held Radical Light*. It's a reflection on how art points to faith and about how faith is a form of art.

The first page of the book contains the sentence that grabbed hold of me this week.

He's talking about how poetry is an expression of longing, of constantly stretching language in pursuit of the timeless, the eternal, the divine.

We are all seeking, Wiman says,

Those moments of mysterious intrusion, that feeling of collusion with eternity, of life and language riled into one wild charge.<sup>1</sup>

Wow. What a sentence. What a description of faith!

*A collusion with eternity. Life and language riled into one wild charge.*

It conveys the idea that faith as this grand adventure, fuelled and focused by a singular desire, by a hunger for mystery and a longing for what can never die.

That's what faith is. Or could be. Or *should* be. Or perhaps once was but is no longer.

I paused and wondered, *When was the last time faith felt like that to me?*

When was the last time faith felt like that to you? It's easy for faith to become so much less than this, isn't it?

Faith can dry out or harden. Like any other vital relationship, faith in God can become commonplace, predictable, stale. The bloom comes off the rose.

Sometimes, the life of faith can seem sort of... cluttered. It becomes a burdensome set of expectations and assumptions and moral obligations and "things I'm supposed to believe..."

And one day you look up and you wonder where the wonder went.

One day, you look up and you see this big package called "faith" that's filled up with all of these things that you're supposed to keep straight, and it feels like a heavy weight.

To begin with, there is this whole belief package that you're supposed to accept and keep straight in your head.

An invisible creator God, a primal fall from grace, the incarnation—Jesus Christ, fully God *and* fully human—miracles, a virgin birth, angels, resurrection from the dead, ascension, future return.

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 3.

*The kingdom of God*—this invisible reality that we claim advances throughout history, and is the true story of where our world is going.

*New creation*—already begun and the final truth about the world.

This entire unseen dimension that is claimed to be behind us, underneath us, all around us, ahead of us, and within us. It's quite a package.

And aside from all the beliefs, there's all kinds of things you're supposed to *do*.

You're supposed to seek peace, to pursue justice, to advocate for those whose voices are not being heard, to feed the poor, to clothe the naked, to attend to the prisoner, the widow, the orphan, the sick, the vulnerable, the marginalized.

You're supposed to speak truth to power (or try).

But that's not all! Even if the metaphysical and ethical demands of Christianity have left you reeling, there's at least one more thing to pile on.

This is the affective component of Christianity. Not only are you supposed to think about and believe the right things about the invisible world as well as display the correct moral behaviour, you're also expected to *feel* a certain way about this whole package.

You're supposed to have spiritual experiences in worship and prayer. You're supposed to read your Bible (and like it!).

You're supposed to be happy and well-adjusted and sincere and eager to share about this whole "faith" package with anyone who expresses an interest.

It's a lot to think/believe/do/feel.

After a while, faith doesn't feel like a "collusion with eternity" or a "wild charge" toward anything but exhaustion.

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I don't know if the scribe in today's gospel reading had anything like this going on in his mind when he approached Jesus. I don't know if he was burnt out by religion, weary of trying to keep it all straight, trying to keep it all together, trying to do what God required.

He may not have been having a faith crisis at all. Maybe he was just curious or looking for a stimulating intellectual exchange.

But whatever was going on his soul at that moment, his question is a big one.

He's drilling down into the foundation of his faith. He senses this Jesus is the guy to help him do it in a unique and authoritative way.

*Of all the commandments, which one is the most important?*

"What's the bottom line, Jesus? I've got this big rule book, this big set of expectations and assumptions about the point of life and how to live it well. If you had to condense it all into a sentence or two, what would it be?"

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

In the context of all of this squabbling and diversity, the scribe wants to know. 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."

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

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

They echo our OT reading from 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.

But Jesus ties the *Shema* to another commandment, first given in Leviticus. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Of these two OT commands, Jesus says "There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe agrees with Jesus' response (I'm sure Jesus was pleased) and 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).

Jesus sees that the scribe has answered wisely.

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

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So, love. Of God and neighbour. These are the words we are supposed to keep in our hearts, according to Deuteronomy, the words the Israelites were commanded to recite to their children, to bind to their hands and their foreheads, to write on their doorposts.

They were to be inescapable words—words that guided and governed them every day of their lives.

These are the words that Jesus repeats as the most important commandments—the words that interpret every other word in the bible.

But these words are so familiar to us that I suspect they might have lost their capacity to fire our imaginations.

We've heard them so many times. We know this is the point of it all, or at least we think we do.

Let's look at these two commandments in reverse order, beginning with love of neighbour.

We know we're supposed to love our neighbour.

We like the idea that Jesus binds us to one another, at least in theory. We like that Jesus makes faith concrete, practical.

We may not always be thrilled with the neighbour that Jesus calls us to love, but we can certainly appreciate that it's the sort of thing we *ought* to do. Like the scribe, we enthusiastically nod our heads.

Yes, loving our neighbour certainly sounds better than “all the burnt offerings and sacrifices”—all the religious rules and regulations that we, like the people in the first century, accumulate over time.

And loving a neighbour is easier for some of us, at least conceptually, than loving God.

I encounter many people who are not really sure what to make of this whole “God” business. They're kind of deconstructing their faith, leaving behind some of the ideas they had when they were younger.

God is invisible, hypothetical, impossible to prove. God doesn't seem too troubled to make himself obvious. But they can really get behind this "neighbour" business.

We don't always know how to love God, so we zero in on our neighbour.

Doesn't 1 John 4 does say that if we can't love our neighbour, who we can see, we can't love God, who we can't see?

Doesn't Jesus himself say that whatever we do for the least of these we do for him?

Yes. You could certainly do far worse than this. There is no shortage of neighbours to love, particularly in a world full of poverty, loneliness, addiction, anxiety, depression.

And the Christian understanding of love is desperately needed in our world. The Greek word *agápē* connotes genuine, concern, fidelity, generosity, selflessness. It involves a genuine attempt to feel and act *for* and *with* others.

Loving our neighbour isn't just about cultivating a sort of "nice" disposition toward those we come across in our everyday life. It's a costly, sacrificial love.

And who knows, loving our neighbour could well be a pathway to coming to love the God who created that neighbour and created us for the task.

But if we zero in exclusively on the second part of the Great Commandment, faith is collapsed into ethics.

Faith can easily become a list of things to do for others, one more burden to pile on already burdened souls. Christianity becomes a social agenda for world improvement, rather than the joyful response to a king and his coming kingdom.

We gradually come to think that love of neighbour *is* love of God, or close enough, at any rate.

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But this is not what Jesus says. Jesus says, "First, love of God, then love of neighbour."

A healthy, faithful love and hopeful love of neighbour, a love that does not despair when it isn't effective and efficient, can *only* emerge out of love of God.

The order Jesus gives us is important. Love properly starts with God.

And we're supposed to be doing it with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Which is kind of a poetic way of saying, "With everything we have and everything we are."

How do we do this?

I would say, simply, pay attention. We attend to that which we love, right? So pay attention to your life.

Pay attention to what you long for.

Pay attention to the hunger for eternity in your heart.

Pay attention to the thirst for justice in your bones.

Pay attention to the beauty that inspires and moves you. Pay attention to the vast scope and intricacy of the created world.

Pay attention to the relationships that nurture your soul and strengthen you for the road.

Pay attention to specificity of the God revealed in Jesus Christ, to the unexpected surprise of an upside-down kingdom, to the healing power of mercy extended, to the breaking down of barriers of hostility, to

Pay attention to the shattering surprise and promise of the central claim of Christianity—Jesus Christ, crucified for the sin of the world, and raised from the grave with the promise of death defeated, and the hope of new life.

Marvel at a God who gives himself away for love's sake, to reclaim and redeem all that he has made.

Recognize that the things that matter most to you can only be received as gifts of grace.

And then respond with gratitude, with joyful praise, with obedience, and with love for the God who makes all this possible.

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Love God. Love your neighbour.

These are the essentials of what it means to follow Jesus. It's not just an optional extra or an "application" to work on once you have your beliefs sorted out.

Love is the pounding heartbeat of our faith. And it's an incredible statement, when you come to think of it.

At the heart of the Christian faith is not a list of doctrines to check off, not a bunch of good deeds to perform, not a philosophy or a set of abstract principles.

It contains all of these things but underneath the much broader and more beautiful umbrella of love.

Love is the point of everything.

We love God because he first loved us. We love one another because this is how God's love is made complete in us.

The love of God is planted in our hearts and minds; we reflect and refract this love back out into the world and in so doing are strengthened in our love and longing for God, love's source and its goal. It's like a divine feedback loop.

Miroslav Volf puts it like this in his book, *Against the Tide*:

The Christian Bible makes clear, in manifold ways, that whatever else the world is, **it is a theater of divine love**—Love whose face shines on creatures; Love whose anger sometimes burns against their all-too-prevalent nastiness; Love who... bears human sin and enmity so as to return us back to our original good.

Love is the expression of faith.

To love is to “collude with eternity.”

Love is the “one wild charge” that our lives—heart, soul, mind, strength—are to be spent in pursuit of.

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

So may we be colluders with eternity. May we spend our lives in love—of God and of neighbour—the “one wild charge” for which we were created, which will save us and welcome us home.

Amen.

