

November 3rd, 2024

Mark 12:28-34 “The Greatest Commandment”

For thousands of years, many religious, philosophical, metaphysical and even medical traditions claim that there are three centers of human nature and experience – Mind, body, and heart. The mind gives us the capacity for thinking, intellect and understanding. The body governs one’s actions, behavior, and strength. The heart guides our emotions and the capacity to be in relationship with one another. We see this concept portrayed in stories and works of art. Take the *Wizard of Oz* for example. Dorothy Gale, the protagonist of the story, is swept away by a tornado from her home in Kansas only to wake up in the magical Land of Oz. She knows she doesn’t belong in Oz, so she begins a quest to find this wizard who may have the key to sending her back home. On her way, she picks up three traveling companions who agree to help her find the wizard. There’s a scarecrow who wants a brain to master intellect and reason. There’s also a lion who wants strength and courage to do good deeds. And finally, there’s a tin woodsman who wants a heart so he can have the emotional capacity to sympathize and feel. At the end of the story when they finally get an audience with the wizard, they discover that they had these traits all along.

Here's another example – Consider the original Star Trek television series from back in the 1960s. The three main characters represent the three archetypes of human nature. Even though he’s not the captain of the starship, Mr. Spock is the calm, cool, logical first officer who uses science and reason to solve seemingly insurmountable problems. He represents the mind and intellect. Captain Kirk is the brave, bold leader who is quick to face danger with his shirt off, his phaser drawn and his handy-dandy double karate chop that he uses on his enemies. He represents strength. And finally, there’s Dr McCoy who is the heart-center of the trio. He’s always trying to get Captain Kirk to see the good in others and challenges Mr. Spock to see beyond calculations and probabilities and embrace his human side.

Now, I cannot, in good conscience, leave you this morning without a comic book reference or two, because I'm ... me. In the DC comic book world, there's the trinity of Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman -- intellect, strength and heart in that order. In the Marvel comics universe you've got Thor representing strength, Iron Man representing intellect and Captain America who is all about the heart. You can probably think of many other examples of how heart, mind, and body show up in art, literature and even science. Shoot, I'm sure there's someone out there today who can make a case for the Three Stooges. See me after worship if you can and we'll talk. The point I'm trying to make is that this ancient way of understanding how human nature works still serves as a good framework for how we encounter the world around us.

In Judaism, there is a prayer that serves as the centerpiece for morning and evening Jewish prayers. It's called the "shema," which in Hebrew means – "Hear." It's the oldest, fixed, daily prayer in the Jewish tradition. "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." Once again, we see "heart, mind, and body" mentioned as the best way to demonstrate our love for God.

In our text this morning, a group of Scribes approach Jesus to play a game called "let's set a trap for Jesus so he'll say something foolish, and we can discredit him." This is immediately after a group of Herodians, Pharisees and Sadducees already tried and failed. The Scribes, who were highly educated people who specialized in reading, writing, and interpreting the law decided that the best way to trip Jesus up is to ask him about what he believes to be the most important commandment. The Scribe asks, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus said, "The first is, '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.'" Of course, that was the correct answer, but I'm fairly certain that the Scribes had a plan of attack if that was the answer Jesus gave. That's just the way the Scribes operated. They liked to take something simple and find a way to

complicate it for argument's sake. But before they could do that, Jesus said, "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Believe it or not, that was a satisfactory answer for those Scribes. They were thinking, "Wow! He managed to answer in a way that captured the intention of the Law, but also included the most important commandment of the Prophets too!" There it was. Love God, love your neighbor. What more is there? Jesus said, "Good job. You get it. High marks and gold stars for everyone. You're a lot closer to the kingdom of God than you think!" He didn't have to say, "Closer than those Herodians, Pharisees and Sadducees," but the implication was there for sure.

The first and greatest commandment is to offer God the entirety of who we are. One's heart, soul, mind, and strength compose the totality of a person and God deserves to have all of who we are. It's a good thing to remember during this time of year when we're considering how much of our time, resources and energy we will give to accomplish the mission and ministry of the church for the next calendar year. It refocuses our perspective on financial giving, from being hyper-focused on budgets and expenses ... that which "keeps the doors of our institution open" ... to giving out of our love for God and neighbor. Re-thinking and recalibrating stewardship in this way requires the totality of one's life; including the mind – the way one perceives one's relationship with money; the heart – the way one associates possessions with pleasure and interpersonal relationships; and the body – the way one spends, saves, and gives money. If all of this is done out of a motivation of love, then we are indeed, "not far from the Kingdom of God." So if you haven't turned in your estimate of giving cards yet, November 17th is the deadline! (Sorry, I had to do that. But really – that's in two Sundays!)

Today is "All Saints Sunday," a day where we remember those who have gone on before us and demonstrated through their witness and example the kind of total love that Jesus advocates for here in this text. I'll be honest, we've taken some pretty big hits over the last few years when it comes to some of the "movers and shakers" in our church who've died.

It would be so easy to fall into a downward spiral of hopelessness and helplessness. “What are we going to do without these people who have so generously shared their time, talents, and resources?” Last week when we were back in Virginia visiting family, my son Cameron was asking about how some of the folks in our church were doing. I had to tell him some of the folks he was asking about died. He said, “Dang! What are you all going to do?” I told him that there were a lot of new people who’ve found a home in our church and have jumped in to continue the ministry that we’ve been doing for the last 141 years.

I know I’ve told this story before, but one of our former pastors, Carolyn Casey-Reed comes back to Chico every now and then for a visit. She and I were both associate Regional Ministers before I came here, so we try to get together for lunch whenever she’s in town. The first time she came to town, I had only been here for a few years. During that time, we made some fairly major changes to our order of worship. Plus, we moved the communion table down from the chancel to here on the floor. I guess I had an expectation that she’d notice these changes and ... y’know ... make some sort of comment about it. Like, “Wow, how did you ever convince folks to bring that communion table down off the chancel?” Then I could tell her the story of the struggle of how we managed to make compromises and soften the hearts of the old guard who said, “Never shall that communion table be moved!” But you know what she said? She said, “I just love coming back here! Everything’s the same!” I said, “What do you mean, everything is the same?! We made some major changes to the order of worship, and we brought the communion table closer to the people, and we have new programs and mission projects and ...” She said, “Oh, you know what I mean. The people are the same.” Okay. I’ll accept that, but you’ve got to admit moving the communion table was a big deal! “Yes, Jesse, you’re a good pastor. But I take comfort in seeing the same people doing ministry in the way they’ve always done it.” Fine.

A few years ago, Carolyn came to town for a visit, and my heart swelled with pride when she said, “Who are these people?” I said, “What do you

mean?” She said, “I have no idea who *any* of these elders are!” Okay. Then she said, “And this is great!” She told me how so many of the churches in the Indiana Region were struggling because when the “old guard” died, there was no one left to fill the leadership roles and many were having to close their doors. And that’s not just a problem in Indiana Disciples congregations either. That’s been a big problem for all steeple churches across the denominational board. But you know what? We’re not doing too bad here at First Christian Church in Chico. Yes, we’ve taken some hits over the last -- heck I’d say eight years when it comes to some of our faithful stewards – but we’ve had plenty of people step up to the plate and meet the challenge. And I’m not talking about the challenge to keep the institution alive, I’m talking about the challenge of meeting ministry needs here in Chico and beyond. Why is this the case?

That goes back to where we started this morning. Mind, body and heart. “Teacher, which commandment has top priority?” Top of the list is, “The Lord our God, the Lord 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.” And – *and*, “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” If those remain at the top of our list of God’s greatest commandments, then we are not far from realizing this Kingdom of God. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven.