

Date: January 24, 2010

Title: Relationship Is Everything

Scripture: Mark 12:28-31

Mark 12:28-34 (NLT) ²⁸ One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the discussion. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" ²⁹ Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: `Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. ³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' ³¹ The second is equally important: `Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these." ³² The teacher of religious law replied, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other. ³³ And I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbors as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law." ³⁴ Realizing this man's understanding, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

I'm wondering if any of you have ever asked this question: Why are we here? Now, I know this is one of those questions that fits into the: "Never get the whole answer" category. But human beings are generally curious and we think of questions like that. Another similarly impossible to answer question we might ask is: Why is there so much unnecessary pain in the world? Is there really a God? Does any of this really have any purpose beyond the here and now? Or, how about: Why did the Denver Broncos go 6 and 0 and then not make it into the playoffs?

Of course, you know I'm just being silly with that last question, but the first one, Why are we here; is a question that I really have given a lot of thought. I don't know why, exactly, I guess I'm just prone to ask those sorts of questions and then spend lots of time trying to come up with some sort of answer that some how lines up with my experience. Maybe I'm thinking that if I know *why* I am here, I figure I'll be better able to live a life that is in harmony with or that supports the *why I'm here*.

I know this is a pretty philosophical question and maybe this isn't something that interests you, but I was thinking that maybe, just maybe I'm not the only person in our congregation that has wondered why he or she is here. So with your permission, I will give you some of my thoughts on this subject. (If you stay seated throughout the message I will take that as your permission)

First, I pretty much have to include God somewhere in my answer. I know that doesn't work for everyone because not everyone believes in God, but I do, so God is part of my

answer. Actually, I believe that God is the one who created me so ultimately; God is the one who has the answer to my question. And if God has the answer to my question it would follow that the first place I look is in what I believe to be God's word – the Bible. I'm pretty sure that God is not writing for Wikipedia so I will need to see what the scripture says.

That is why I have turned to the scriptures for this morning. I don't think we can get the whole answer to this question from a few verses, but I think that there are times we can get big chunks of the answer if we look closely at the verse.

This passage of scripture revolves around a significant question: What is the most important of all the commandments? What more than anything else does God want us to do with our time? It's not exactly the same question as "why are we here", but I think the two questions are related. If Jesus can clue me in on the most important of things I should do with my life, then maybe I can get a clue from this what I am here for.

Jesus answers the man, "The most important of all the commandments is this:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. ³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' And then he continues: *'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* No other commandment is greater than these."

It seems pretty clear to me that the bottom line answer is that we are to love. We are to love God and we are to love each other. In a different scripture Jesus goes to pretty great lengths to let us know that He is using the term neighbor to include just about anyone you might meet whether you know them or not. I don't want to get too far into the discussion of who is included in the term neighbor but Jesus makes it clear in Luke 10:29-37 that we are all neighbors to each other.

So, we are to love God with everything we have and we are to love each other as much as we love ourselves. Actually in John 15:12 Jesus takes this even one step further and says we are to love one another as He, Jesus has loved us. This is even more intense because Jesus loved us so much he was willing to die for us.

But the point that I am trying to make is that the most important thing God wants us to do is to love God and love each other. Is that the answer to my question, then? The reason we are here is to love? I think that might be a big part of the answer. But if that is the answer, there is one more step I want to take. Have you ever tried to love someone you didn't know? I'm sure that in some sense you can love everyone in the world, but let's just say there is a woman who lives in Viet Nam. Can you love her if all you know is that she is a woman in Viet Nam? How about if you know that this woman has a husband who was injured in the war and she raised her grand daughter because her daughter became pregnant by a GI who left when his tour was over and she never saw him again. How about if you found out that the man who is the father of this woman's

grand daughter is your brother and somehow he just found out about the child he never knew he had. How about if your brother invites you to go with him to Viet Nam to investigate this and you meet this woman who has raised your niece and discover that she is a gentle woman who holds absolutely no resentment what-so-ever against your brother or the American people? Now, I made this whole scenario up, but if this really happened, do you think you might be better able to love this woman with a little more information?

Do you see what the difference is? You might be able to affect a sort of general love toward this woman from Viet Nam, but until you know something about her, you are not going to be able to love her very deeply. Once you get to know her, though, the love can shift from the sort of general overall good will you might have for all people to a love that is very strong and clearly distinguished.

You know what the difference is here? The difference is relationship. What I would like to suggest is that whether it is loving God or loving neighbor, the only way we can love the way God wants us to love is for us to develop and strengthen our relationships – relationships with both God and with people. And what I am beginning to believe is that perhaps the reason we are here is to learn how to be in relationship – relationship with God and with people. I'm not completely sure about this. I might have an insight tomorrow that shifts my thinking, but the more I study scripture and think about what it says, the more I suspect that perhaps the most important thing we have to do on this earth is to develop our relationships. Now it could be that relationships are really only a way to facilitate love, but the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that we can't really love well without relationship. Oh, we can give lip service to love and we can pretend to love others, but without relationship, we are pretty much just going through the motions.

If I'm right about this, it gives me something to focus on. I can begin to try to develop my relationships and actually I have begun to try to do that, but what I have noticed is that it is not easy. It is not easy because relationship means that I have to be able to care about knowing what other people care about. I don't have to care about the same things other people care about, but I do have to care about them as a person. Developing a relationship means that I must go beyond myself far enough to encounter who another person really is. What I am discovering is that this can be very tough – especially when we are talking about the people with whom you most want to be in relationship. To be in relationship with another person, I must be genuinely interested in knowing more about what that other person is passionate about, where his or her gifts lie and who he or she is as a person.

I find that I also need to recognize and put aside my own prejudices so that they don't inhibit my being in relationship with another person. Learning how to be in relationship with someone who thinks totally different from the way we do is tough, but I think that just might be why we are here. Once we get past our own prejudices and/or resentments or whatever else gets between us and other people we see a clearer

picture of a unique person who is God's special creation, and something sacred happens. Relationship happens, and when relationship happens we can better keep the commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

I recently heard an interview with Greg Mortensen talking about an experience he had with the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1996. He was there building schools. This is how he described what happened to him:

I went into an area without asking for permission to go in the area. And in the Pashtunwali code, which is the tribal ethic, first, I should get permission to visit them. So if I came to see you in New York, I would need to talk to the tribal chief. I couldn't just wander in here and say, "Hey, Bill, I need to talk to you." I need to get permission. You would invite me. But then your obligation is to protect me with your life and give hospitality to me. When I was kidnapped, I wasn't tortured, but they weren't very friendly with me. I started getting really depressed for two, three days. I started envisioning getting hauled outside and, you know, just kneeling down, getting executed. And then I realized my only way to maybe escape was to befriend my captors. So the first thing I did is I asked them to bring a holy Quran to them-- to me to read. And obviously I don't read Arabic at that time. So I said, "Do you need to bring the mullah to explain to me what your faith is about?" And that helped win them over a little bit. And then on the sixth day, I know that in their culture life's greatest event is the birth of a first-born son. So I told them my wife is seven months pregnant. Now, I didn't know, I ended up having a daughter. But that really won them over because I said I need to go home and be with the birth of my son when he's born because that's their life's greatest event. And then on the eighth day, they led me outside, blindfolded me. I thought again this was my day, and instead they took me to a clearing, and they released me and they gave me 10,000 rupees, which is about \$300 at the time in '96, to help build the next school because they found out what I was trying to do. And they said, "We're sorry that we, you know, we detained you. And we want to support your work."

Folks, we are created for relationship. Jesus didn't just talk about this, he lived it so we could see what it looked like. Everything Jesus did in life was an extension of God's will. But every part of Jesus' life also expressed his love for all persons. In His life, His teachings and even in His death, Jesus showed us what it looked like to be in a deep relationship with God, with His disciples, and even with ordinary people he met every day. Even on the cross, Jesus was cultivating a relationship with the two thieves being crucified on either side of him. And even the cross on which he died was a symbol for relationship with God (The vertical member of the cross) and relationship with others. (The horizontal member of the cross)

And what Jesus did he wants us to do as well. In **John 13:15 (NLT)** Jesus says “I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.”

We are to love each other, but how do we love without some sort of relationship? Whether it is the Taliban whom most of us would consider the enemy or the people who live with us in our own home, we are meant to be in relationship.

Why are we here? We all know that this is a question that is much deeper than a single answer. But somehow, I can't help but believe that a large part of the answer lies in relationship... relationship to God and relationship to others. I believe we are created for it and the better we learn this the better off we will be as individuals and as a global community. It's not easy. It takes time. It can be very disappointing... heart-breaking at times. But I believe we must not run from it... we must pursue it with our lives.

And to close this morning, I would like to use as our hymn of commitment, #2223 They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love. The words will be on the screen, but I want you to look at the words as little as possible because as we sing this song through, I would like for us to turn and look at each other in our congregation. These are some of our most important relationships – our brothers and sisters in Christ. These are the folks we worship with, work with, laugh with and cry with. The Love starts with our relationship with God and then it goes out from each one of us as our relationships become a vehicle for that love. Jesus said to... love God... and love our neighbor... then he showed us how to build and strengthen our relationships. I'm pretty sure this is why we are here. Amen.