

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, March 1, 2009

Mark 12:28-34

What Comes First?

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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Many years ago a friend of mine was driving her car and it started to make a strange noise. It got louder and louder - the car kept going though - as the noise became more and more annoying, she turned up the volume on her radio. The louder the noise, the louder the radio. Well, after a while the car just stopped. There she was, stranded somewhere on the highway. The oil was completely gone from the car - the engine totally burned out.

When her father asked about the signs of trouble that must have been there, she responded, "Yes - there was a noise. It got louder and louder. I just turned up the radio." You can imagine what her father's response could have been.

Well, we live in a noisy world, don't we. And I think we turn up the volume too - to drown out some of our thoughts, some of our feelings, some of our deepest yearnings. We turn up the volume so much that pretty soon we've lost our center; the noise builds on itself so much that all we hear is that noise - there's no order to it, no point to it, there's no reacting to anything but the chaos of the sound. But then we can't cover up the noise any more and our engines stop too. And we're stranded somewhere we don't want to be, helpless, overwhelmed, stuck. Stuck somewhere out in the wilderness.

And, you know, I think our own internal noise affects us as much, maybe even more, than the external noise. The internal noise of shoulds, what ifs, worry, our own personal struggles - that noise can be deafening. I'm sure we all experience that and I suspect that's one reason some of us gather here on Sunday mornings. To quiet the noise, both external and internal, to look for the center, the focus of our lives. To step back, to listen, to hear.

Maybe that's the goal for us this Lent as we begin our series and as we follow the devotional book many of us are reading: to quiet the noise both inside and outside of us and to step back, to listen, to hear, to learn to love God, neighbor, and self in a new way.

Hear, O Israel! Moses calls out to his people in the wilderness. Listen! And what is it that we hear: the basic, most important commandment. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Love God. Love God first. Frederick Buechner writes, "We have heard the words so often that we no longer hear them. They are too loud to hear, too big to take in. We know the words so much *by heart* that we scarcely know them any longer as words spoken *to the heart* out of a mystery beyond all knowing. We take the words so much for granted that we hardly stop to wonder where they are seeking to take us. Above all else, the words say, *you shall love* - not, first your neighbor as yourself because that is second and comes later. On the contrary, it is God you shall love first before you love anything else, and you shall love him with all that you are and all that you have in you to become - whatever that means, whatever that involves. The words don't explain. They just proclaim and command."

Where, indeed, do those words take us. Buechner's so right - we know the words from childhood but then every once in a while, we really hear them in a direct way - we hear the command. We hear the proclamation. And that's powerful.

And then centuries later, the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Teacher, what is the great commandment?" If Jesus spoke today, he might put the words something like this:

"Listen up people. Here is the most important thing in all of life: this is what comes first: the one thing that will make all the difference in your living. Here is the one key to becoming a fully alive, whole person. You shall love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. In other words, the most important thing in all of life is to put God at the absolute center of your living!"

At the absolute center. Love God first. Before your spouse, before your children. Before yourself. Before your car, before your "things", before your job, before everything. Love God first. To quiet all the noise inside and outside of us and love God first!

Buechner asks along with each of us, "I wonder, can we? Do we even know what loving God looks like and feels like - not just taking comfort in him as an idea, not just believing in him as a possibility, not just worshipping him, but actually loving him; wanting at least to be near him, wanting at least to do things for him, because that is the least of what love seems to mean?"

Hear, O Israel. You shall love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength. With our heart: not just our feelings but the very core of our being. Believing the affirmation that "God made me. God loves me. I am a child of God. God's love and love of God flows in and through every fiber of who I am." And believing that is also true for every single person we meet on our journey of life. We are all children of God. All of us.

With our soul: to live in a constant, conscious contact with God. To begin and end each day with prayer - and not just then but all the day long. How often do you have conversations with God throughout your day? We've talked about this in confirmation - and I've challenged them to every day, make their first thought when they wake up, thank you God. And then when they go to bed, their last waking thought: thank you God. They say, what if I'm not really thankful for anything special - my response - that you woke up this morning. You're healthy. You have school to attend. You have families and friends who love you. And at night - you have a warm bed to get into, your stomach is full - you have hot water to shower in. Oh, don't we have a lot to be thankful for! They begin to see the point. May it be true for all of us as well.

And we love God with our mind: with our intellectual selves - thoughts, attitudes, thinking patterns shaped by the love of God and love for God.

With our strength: our physical beings. To be there for God. To be physically present for God. To be God's person in the world around us.

And then, centuries later, when the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Teacher, what is the great commandment?" he adds, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." It's because we love God that we love our neighbor. Loving God allows us to love our neighbor. Loving God comes first.

This is radical stuff from Jesus: to the Jewish person, a neighbor was another Jew. To Jesus, a neighbor is anyone who has need. Anyone who has need.

And this is radical stuff for us too: loving our neighbor goes further than bringing food for the food bank or serving at the Soup Kitchen or giving money to any number of worthy causes or donating clothes to those who need them. All of this is terribly important, of course - we are called to do all of these things, to share, to care, to minister to all kinds of needs of our neighbors. But there's more. And that more can be radical and painful and very risky.

Back in Middlebury I remember a really hard time when through a dear friend of mine I learned about multiple incidents - multiple incidents - of blatant, evil racism at the high school. Vicious words. Terrible pain. Evil acts of spoken violence. Words spoken in hate, in anger. Devastating words to those on the receiving end. My friend Gaelle who some of you have met - was one of those on the receiving end - she was staying with me while her mother was away on business and she sat on my couch, sobbing, choking out the words of what had happened.

As I listened to her and thought about it - it was all I could think about, really for days - I ranged from feelings of anger to profound sadness, back to anger, to frustration. How can this be? Surprised by these expressions of hatred? A bit, at least in the beginning. But not really - that high school was no different from any other; that community was no different from any other - we fool ourselves if we think otherwise. But what was it that God was calling us to do, to be, not just then but right now, right here?

Hear, O Israel. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself.

All of the noise fell away from me as I listened to the recounting of these incidents that week - all of a sudden nothing else mattered - it was a moment when the only thing that mattered was the great commandment, made real in a new and dramatic way: Love God first! Love your neighbor as you love yourself! You know, doing laundry, changing the litter box, making dinner, cleaning the house, watching a TV show, all the things that make my life so "busy", all the things that make our lives so "busy" - none of that mattered any more. None of it.

What mattered was getting back to the center - getting off that frantic merry-go-round of activity that really doesn't mean anything at all if we don't love God first. That doesn't mean anything at all if we don't love our neighbor. So, how do we live that out? How do we stand up and say, that's enough. We won't tolerate this violence against our brothers and sisters any more. No more. Not in the high school. Not anywhere. And how do we stand together as people of God, as people who love God first. First, before everything else.

How will we "be there" for God in this and other situations like it? How will we be God's person in this broken world around us? How will we take the risk to be God's person - it's not easy. Will we manage to take that risk at all? Can we move away from all that distracts us from the center, back into the center? What really matters?

For some of those students affected by this evil, it meant telling school officials about the incidents - going public. It meant doing their part to revitalize a "diversity" project at the high school in a new and more meaningful way, because now the problem was real, it was named, it was in front of all of us. And I was so honored to stand with them and support their efforts.

And, how else does this moving away from the center show up in our lives? In the lives of those around us? Not just in violent words or deeds but in more subtle ways

too. In a self absorption that puts our own wants and needs first. I wonder about the increase in rudeness, of inconsideration for others' wants and needs, an arrogance that shows itself in a lack of respect for each others' time and energy and even presence. For the focus on building self-esteem that's so pervasive in our culture. For a sense of entitlement that puts "me first."

Seems like we've somehow reversed the order of the parts of the Great Commandment. Let's ponder that, each in our own way.

Will we return to that great commandment of loving God first? And then will we have everything we do, everything we are, informed by that love of God?

"And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you rise."

What is it we teach our children? What words are on our hearts? What words do we talk of when we sit in our homes, walk these beautiful roads in our town, change classes at the high school, on the hockey field, on the soccer field. You name the place and the time in your own life.

And what do we teach our children by our actions? How do our children know what's first in our lives? Is it things? Signs of "success"? The number of activities in which we're involved? Grades? How do we live the great commandment? If we were put on trial for living the great commandment, would there be enough evidence to convict us?

How will people know that we put God first? Sometimes we refer to those people as saints - what makes a saint, anyway? Not just the Ghandis, the Mother Teresas, the Francis of Assisi - but what makes people we know saints?

Maybe its those people who reflect that deep love of God in all they say and all they do - those people who show forth their love for God in their daily lives in quiet, profound ways. Those people who quietly speak up against violence, against racism, against injustice - but they don't just speak up. They act. Quietly, without fanfare. They teach by their example what it is to belong to the body of Christ - because, friends, that's what we all have in common.

Hear, O Israel. 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. May we each listen. May we each hear these words of promise as well as command. Amen.

Let us pray:

Oh God, the world pulls us in so many directions at once. The noise in our souls is deafening. The noise all around us is so pervasive, so all encompassing, that we lose track of our focus, of our call to be your people. Our priorities are unbalanced and we know it. We get caught up in the demands of the world, of our busy lives, and we don't hear you calling us over and over again. Quiet us and let us hear. Center us and let us love you more. Focus us and let us turn to you, the source of all life, of all gift, of all love. Show us the way, O God, to put you first - take away all that interferes in our call to discipleship, help us to know that without loving you first, nothing else matters. You are our rock. You are that never-changing One upon whom we depend. We thank you for your constant care, for the indwelling of your Spirit within us, for the love which you give to each of us unconditionally. Help us to reflect that love, O God. Help us to share all that we are with You and each other. Make each of us your ambassadors in this world full of pain, sorrow, hurt, anger, violence, injustice - help each of us to do our part in bringing your realm to your world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.