***FIRST THINGS FIRST***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Hebrews 13:7, 16 and Mark 12:28-34

Which commandment is the first of all? For some doctors and nurses recalling the advice given them in their medical training, it may be: *do no harm*. For legendary football coach John Heisman it was apparently, *do not fumble*, since he told his players: “Gentlemen, it is better to have died a small boy than to fumble this football.” For the knights in our midst the first commandment of chivalry is: *Thou shalt believe all that the church teaches and shalt observe all its directions.* What the church teaches for you and for me to believe and observe is what Jesus told the scribe:

*The first commandment 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.*

*The second is this:*

*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

*There is no other commandment greater than these.*

That is what Jesus said. The primary directive, the most important principle, the first commandment of our faith and life is: *Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself.* So says Jesus!

Those commandments were not new to Jesus or to the scribe who asked him, “Which commandment is first of all?” The first commandment Jesus quotes is recorded in the book of Deuteronomy and is known in Judaism as the SHEMA. According to Deuteronomy it is

a commandment to be held in your heart,

a commandment to be taught to your children at home and away from home,

a commandment to be recited at the beginning and end of the day,

a commandment to be carried with you wherever you go,

a commandment to be written on the doorposts of your home.

It is in essence, a commandment that is to be at the very center of your life, a constant reminder of your responsibility to love with all your being the one and only God who is the Lord. They are words familiar to the victims and families of Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, for their God is our God, the one and only God whom we are to love with all that we are. To put that commandment at the center of life means that it is to be at the center of all of life – in good times and bad – and so for those folks in Pittsburgh it has been enmeshed in their suffering in the aftermath of the shootings there. Sometimes loving God is hard, for it seems that God could with the wave of a divine hand prevent such suffering and evil in the world and grant us all peace. How do we fulfill the commandment to love God with all that we are when we are suffering or angry or just not in a very loving mood?

Perhaps the starting point is to acknowledge that God first loved us – endlessly, unconditionally, eternally, from the very beginning, God loves us. God loved us into being in creation and gave us the breath of life; God promises to be with us in joy and in sorrow, in prosperity and in suffering; promises to sustain and comfort us, to bring good from even the worst situation; and God promises to be with us after we draw our last breath, to love us eternally in life beyond this life and so to grant us hope with which to face all our days including the end of days. The proof of God’s great love for us is God’s presence among us in Jesus, who suffered and died and rose again so that we might have life, hope and peace, not only in the future but here and now! How can we love God in the midst of suffering? Because God loved us enough to suffer for us and so to suffer with us when tragedy strikes! At this table we remember that sacrifice of God for us in Jesus, but we recall too Jesus’ resurrection and his promise to be with us always and his invitation to sit at table with him in the heavenly kingdom of God. We love God because God *first* loved us and *still* loves us – loves us more than we can imagine and far more than we deserve!

How then are we to show our love for God? Loving God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength is not some abstract concept. It has flesh and bones – your flesh and bones and those of the neighbors whom you are to love and serve as God commands. Loving God with all that you are means putting your hands, your skills, your creativity, your time, and your wallet where your heart, mind, soul, and strength are. It means holding nothing back. It is a commitment to love God with all of your life, not just with pieces of it. That is what that first commandment is all about. There may be times when we rail at God because the world is not the way we want it to be, which is often, I suspect, not the way God wants it to be either. Loving God does not mean that we cannot argue with God or vent our frustration with how things are. That happens in families from time to time, and God is big enough to take it. God does not love us any less for it. But our love for God is not dependent upon the world being the way we want it to be or getting our way. Our love for God, like God’s love for us, is unconditional.

Do you love God? Do you love the Lord your God with all your being, with all that you are, with all that you have, with all that you do – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year – or does God get something less from you? Do you love God in your work and your play, at home and at school, at the grocery store and at the beach? How do you show your love for the Lord your God who gives you life with each breath that you take and who promises to be with you and love you after all your breaths cease?

There was a time when God’s people believed that they showed love for God by offering sacrifices and burnt offerings. But the prophet Micah proclaimed that what God really required of us was to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. The prophet Amos told us that God was far less interested in sacrifices than in justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The essence of their prophecies is that we love God by obeying God and living as God calls us to live – justly, righteously, humbly, compassionately, peaceably, lovingly. We show our love for God by being the kind of people God created us to be, and that leads directly to that second commandment which Jesus says is akin to the first: *love your neighbor as yourself*!

Mother Teresa, who knew a great deal about loving her neighbors, knew that obeying that commandment is not always easy. She writes:

*People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.*

*Love them anyway.*

*If you do good, people will accuse you of ulterior motives.*

*Do good anyway…*

*The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.*

*Do good anyway…*

*People really need help but may attack you if you help them.*

*Help anyway.*

*Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth.*

*Give the world the best you have anyway*![[1]](#endnote-1)

That is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. It means loving your neighbor even when it is hard to love your neighbor, praying for your neighbors even when it is hard to pray for them, doing good for your neighbors even when they do no good for you. It means loving ***all*** your neighbors – not just the nice neighbors, not just the neighbors who are like you and who you like, not just the Christian neighbors, not just the American neighbors, not just the Republican or Democratic neighbors. It means loving the Jewish folks in Pittsburgh who are mourning the loss of life in that senseless shooting and it means loving the shooter and his family too; it means loving the migrants on that caravan weaving its way through Mexico in search of a better life but also those who would cruelly separate children from their parents at the border; it means loving those with whom you disagree and those you find disagreeable; it means loving all the children of the world, ***all*** your neighbors, not with lofty platitudes about love, but with concrete action, because that is what God calls us to do, and in doing so you show your love for God.

Such love does not demand that you agree with those you are called to love or that you acquiesce in any wrong they might do. Sometimes the loving thing to do is to oppose what they do or might yet do – as with the shooter in Pittsburgh or those who would separate parents and children at the border. Justice and righteousness demand such a response. But loving your neighbors does demand that you respect your neighbors as children of God, help them when they are the victims of injustice, stand ready to do good for them if the opportunity presents itself, and pray God’s blessing upon them that God’s will may be done for them, through them, and when necessary despite them – even as we ask God to work in us, through us, and when necessary, despite us. For we all are children of God!

The first commandment among all the commandments for the children of God is to love God with all that you are. The second is to love your neighbor as yourself. No commandment is greater than these, says Jesus. How then will you fulfill these commandments and show your love for God and neighbor? The words we heard from the letter to the Hebrews this morning, the same words that are printed on our blue pledge cards, seem to echo the advice of Mother Teresa: *Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

Do good, share what you have, love your neighbor.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.

These are the ways we show our love for God, for these are the ways God has called us to live as disciples of Jesus. Do your actions day to day and the commitments on your pledge card today reflect the kind of whole-hearted love God asks of you? What do your gifts – the sharing of your time, talents, and resources – say about your love for God and for your neighbors? God loves you! How then do you, will you, show your love for God? Amen

1. Quoted by David G. Berry in the *Newsletter of First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale*, September 5, 2001, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)