

“Shema”

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

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Listen up. Pay attention. Hear. What does it take to hear?

“Shema,” my title, is the Hebrew word “Hear.” In today’s Gospel, Jesus in the midst of a religious debate with the scribes, teachers of the Hebrew law. No slouch in such matters, Jesus does such a good job in this debate (captured in preceding verses) that one of the scribes asks Jesus, in so many words, “Jesus, out of all this religious talk and legal-ese, which law is the most important?”

In response, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This passage is written on a scroll and carried about; or symbolized in the mezuzah that is one the doorpost of Orthodox, and some Conservative, Jewish homes. It declares:

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.”

In his paraphrase “The Message” Eugene Peterson renders it “Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy!”

Yet Jesus does not stop there. Maybe he’s just a preacher needing one final thought; indulging our tendency to say, “Well, on the one hand...but then, on the other hand...” Regardless, he expands on his answer with another verse from Leviticus 19:18:

“The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

So what does it take to hear? Love. Whether heaven or earth-directed, love is the common denominator. Such love yearns for God and for the well-being of neighbor and self. If this sounds like an echo of last Sunday’s message, it is; with more exhortation.

Too often our love omits one of these partners. We get too busy for God. We neglect prayer, reading scripture, or public and private worship. We become so absorbed with self that we neglect neighbor, whether across the world or across the room. For others, we become “weary in well-doing” and fail to truly love ourselves. I recently said to someone, “No one will take care of your health but you.” They love others, and others love them. But other priorities, even well-intended ones on behalf of others, not only crowds out self-care but puts their overall health at risk.

So in this religious argument, Jesus says explicitly what we know intuitively: Clean your ears out! Pay attention! Hear! If we don’t love God, neighbor and self, life and faith are unbalanced

But there’s good news! Being here shows we’re on it. Self-reflection on these matters is part of what Sunday worship is about. So is redirection. The scribe in Mark’s story summarized what Jesus said and then added his own observation: “It is more important than all offerings and sacrifices.” Wow! More than committees? Fair on the Green? Choirs? Extravagant Generosity? Community supper? Well, yes:

if these and other ministries are undertaken only for their sacrifice and not for love. So insightful was the scribe that Jesus replied, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

In Disciple Bible Study we sometimes imagine ourselves as a character in the scripture, hearing it from their vantage point. I used this practice in preparing this sermon, perhaps not co-incidentally on All Saints Day. I imagined I was the scribe: that for once I "got it," that my life was in balance; and that the love I desire daily but manage to give and receive less often was truly and fully there. I felt an overwhelming sense of peace. Later, praying the Lord's Prayer and coming to "Thy kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven" I felt again that mysterious assurance in the words of Jesus: "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

Yet loving God, self and neighbor can create a trinity of competition. Sometimes we put must love self before others. Sometimes we love others first. Sometimes multiple claims of for priority of time and effort must be settled, and not all are pleased with the settlement. Sometimes loving and trusting God means letting go of outcomes. Sometimes we hold on to hope tightly; sometimes we must agree that "hope is the enemy of acceptance." Not easy: the challenges are as varied as we are.

A final thought. The debate in Mark's story was not a private matter. Neither is our faith. Like the scribe's insight, our faith is public. I recently surprised someone by telling them weddings are public events. The reception is different but anyone can attend a church wedding. So, today: we are in this very public place about to take this very public sacrament. Hearing God means remembering this public side of love. With power loss comes no light or heat. Tree removal, disabled traffic signals and line repair snarl traffic everywhere. So consider George. He fumed as the driver before him sat while the light changed. And when it changed back. George swore. He gestured. He beat on the steering wheel. He stopped when the police officer tapped on his window. Gun drawn.

When George said "You can't arrest me for hollering in my car" the officer responded by inviting George into the back of his cruiser. After some outside radio exchanges, the officer returned to let George go. Said George triumphantly, "See, I knew you couldn't arrest me for what I yelled in my own car."

The officer said, "Of course not. I was directly behind you at the light. I saw your anger and thought 'What a jerk.' Then I noticed the cross hanging from your rearview mirror, the fish on the trunk lid and the "Keep Christ in Christmas" car magnet, and I naturally thought you stole the car from a Christian."

Here O Milford: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and your neighbor as yourself.