

Mark 12:28-34

12:28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

12:29 Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

12:30 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.'

12:31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

12:32 Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other';

12:33 and 'to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself' --this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

12:34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

I had a sermon written for today. It's honestly, I think, one of the finest sermons I've ever composed. I like its structure. It's concise. It speaks to some of the ways I believe we need to be both little church and big Church. But knowing that I'd be away on Thursday and Friday, I wrote the better part of this morning's planned sermon on Sunday and

Monday of last week. And while all of it is from my heart, it's not what's on my heart this morning.

So I'm not gonna read it to you today. There are printed copies in the vestibule, and the text is posted to the church website, and if I'm able, I'll work to make a recording as well. I still believe the spoken word amplifies and clarifies the written word. But the Spirit has been speaking to me this week – that's the Spirit of our Creator, not to mention dozens of our own spirits, and I need to give voice to Them/them today.

I'm gonna share a few things with you, and these thought-strands may seem a little bit scattered, but I promise I'll work to connect the dots.

Let me begin by saying that I'm not only grateful for each of you that compose the community of saints that is Millbrook Baptist Church, but I love each of you dearly and wholly. And I know that I can safely and confidently express the same sentiment on behalf of our entire ministry team. We are here for you, and we have got you. Always. And nothing can change that. Ever. We recognize, daily, if not hourly, the sacred privilege of your invitation into the most intimate and vulnerable spaces of your lives, and to be intentional in marking meaning in every season as a faith collective. We experience, with you, in hospital rooms, in parlors, at scattered tables, and even in places like amusement parks, and five-kilometer races, and pumpkin carvings, those moments, where we like the scribe, are a little closer to God's kin-dom.

I want to say, also, that the experiences which have shaped and formed my personal faith, particularly those as a child, youth, young adult, working adult, deacon, and clergyman – the church around me – have been ideal. I've never had to significantly deconstruct my theology,

because it has been constructed, nourished, and supported by SO many architects of love, inclusion, encouragement, intentionality, and creativity – a village that has lifted me in perpetuity. My faith family has given me the tools to tinker and evolve in such a way as to never require a demolition and rebuild of what I hold dear. I am profoundly grateful for what I realize now more than ever has been the most supreme and the most unearned privilege of my life.

Lastly, I have a rather low esteem, or perhaps just less a sense of mystique for the proclaimer. Maybe that's the collateral damage of being a PK and PGC and now a preacher myself. But I think it's more my belief that we are all ministers and partners to one another. And the proclamation or sermon, however hard we may seek to make it otherwise, is too often a one-way communication. I get to spend a week thinking about what I'm gonna say to you, but rarely do any of you get a week to think about your response to me, let alone, one with a regular, uninterrupted, and highly visible platform. And by the time you are ready to talk about last week, I'll most likely be thinking about next week!

I'm telling you all of this, because these details have informed my sense of calling, and they've informed how I approach the high honor of getting to be your minister.

I cannot imagine lacking the feeling, at any point in my life, that my congregation fills me up. That I get to do church well with church buddies. That this is my safe place. That this is my called place. That I know, beyond any doubt, that I am a person made in God's image and loved by God.

And I grieve, every time, I imagine a barrier, real or perceived, trivial or weighty, theologically sound or unsound, that prevents one of you from having that very same feeling. I want, desperately, for every single person who has ever existed to experience the depth of the love it feels like, when one experiences a love that is really, truly Millbrooky. I want your voices to be heard, your gifts to be shared, your imprint to embolden this collective creation.

Therefore, I have refused to draw lines in the sand – I have no desire to win polity arguments, to pick the color of the sanctuary carpet or the entrée of the fellowship supper, or to insist upon a conformed expression of how each of you experience the divine image in which you are all so wonderfully made. I have worked to avoid delivering radical and politically-charged sermons. I have worked to avoid suggesting whole-scale changes to our programming. I have sought to bring a little something of my personality into the character of this congregation without shattering its existing composition and identity. And I have carried an anxiety that something I say, or do, or feel, might disrupt your lives in such a way as to somehow make Millbrook less Millbrooky for you. I've told myself I have no desire to be a prophet, because my calling is to be your pastor.

The seminary term for this is meeting people where they are, not where we think people ought to be. I have worked to do that. But today, I confess, that in my great desire to meet people where they are, I have too often failed to bring my whole self into those encounters. Yes, always with my compassion and empathy. But perhaps not enough with my convictions.

As I reflect on nearly fifteen years of professional ministry, which has somehow coincided with five of the most polarizing election cycles in

our lifetime, I've wanted my driveway, and this pulpit, and the pastor's study, and the bus stop, and the neighborhood pub, and all the parts of my ecosystem to be a safe space, tucked away from the political, social, and cultural divisiveness that shatters all our sense of civility toward and amongst one another.

But I need to tell you something. In my efforts to maintain this well-minded and sacred vacuum, I confess that I've really just been clinging to my privilege. My truth is this: no matter the outcome of the elections that have occurred in the years of my adulthood, me, personally, I've been just fine. Better than fine. If my candidate wins, I want to hear the news cycle. If my candidate loses, it's like watching a four-year non-stop loop of Dallas Cowboy and New York Yankee tickertape parades. Policies, good or bad, have been thought exercises, not felt or lived experiences.

But I understand more clearly and more publicly today, that I cannot follow this great commandment to love God and neighbor if I cling to a vacuum, if I refuse to see how my own actions have the ability to both heal and wound persons beyond the comfort and safety of my bubble. I must speak what I really see in order that I may better see my neighbor, and in order that I may better love my neighbor.

Not just this cycle, but in every cycle, our electorate, our nation, has advanced a myth of scarcity, clung to the falsehood of otherness, and worshipped the idol of the Dow Jones Industrial Average. And as much as I want to say I'm not a part of that, we are not a part of that, I am, and we are. But we aren't unique. How soon Israel doubted God in the wilderness when they thought there was no bread. How insistent Israel was upon a king, even as Samuel offered the wise counsel of God.

But I've seen flashing read lights.

Watching TV this week, on multiple channels in multiple programming from news to sports to movies, I was served advertisements imploring me to take advantage of \$.25 Cialis and Viagra pills. This, as our nation seeks to engage in hard, meaningful, substantive dialogue about reproductive rights and other vital healthcare services available for women. Policies affect every person in my ecosystem.

I travelled in airports this week, looking as haggard as I could look: beat up jeans, baseball cap, zip hoodie, well-worn shoes. I couldn't have had a more pleasant experience from check-in to security to flight. Not so for the beautiful family of five in front of me, dressed in their Sunday best. Their skin was darker; their accents heavier; their papers, even though supremely-credentialed, much more cumbersome for security personnel than the simple license I used. No matter. They got the full treatment. And don't we all feel safer?!? Policies affect every person in my ecosystem.

I had the privilege on Thursday night to attend a banquet celebrating the accomplishments of teachers, administrators, social workers, the real ministers – those ordained, called to be leaders in their community and forge the futures of our children. And they shared stories of how their families and heritages have undergirded them, made them the leaders they are today. But they also shared that because they were persons of color, they have too often been asked to tamp down the expressions of their culture, to be just a little bit less of themselves. Policies affect every person in my ecosystem.

What I need you to know, dear ones, is this: I see more clearly now more than I ever have, the depth with which must follow the great

commandment, the very one we've written in our walls. This must be our guide. This must be our compass. And if we are to ever, really, wholly, truly reclaim this space as safe, we must allow this commandment to disrupt us, to challenge us, to break open our bubble.

So I am pledging to you today, that every decision I make, every sermon I give, every relationship in which I engage, will not be framed by events in Raleigh or Washington, but rather by my heart, soul, mind, and strength's response to the question: is this loving neighbor, and is this loving God? And if the answer is no, then it has no place, none whatsoever, in my life, and in your life, and in the trajectory of Millbrook Baptist Church.

I want to share a favorite story about my mother. When my mom was about seven or eight years old, she and her parents and sister lived in New York city for a year. My grandfather was completing the in-person requirements of his Doctorate in Christian Education at Union Theological Seminary on the campus of Columbia University. My mom had just learned to turn cartwheels. Columbia's campus, designed in the gothic style, complete with arches and covered breezeways, was the perfect place to hone her skills.

The story goes that one day, she and a friend were playing king and queen. They stood like sentinels at one end of a walkway, and sought to procure a toll from any passersby. "If you want to come through, you must perform a cartwheel!" they said. Their spirits were dampened, because nearly everyone ignored them – there were places to go and people to see. But then, a kind man with silver hair, and a heavy Swiss accent, and a cumbersome overcoat engaged them. "Okay," he said, "But first, you must hold my coat." The man attempted something like a cartwheel, probably more of a somersault, and as he did, his pocket

change and other belongings scattered down the stone corridor. The children were delighted. And he seemed to be, too! They helped him collect his belongings, and adjust his coat, and he was on his way.

My grandparents later informed my mother that this kind man was none other than Paul Tillich, perhaps the greatest theological mind of the twentieth century, if not ever. When I think about his kindness, when I think about his vision, when I think about his ability to see God's kin-dom in the bright possibilities and joy of two small children, I am simply overwhelmed. Overwhelmed, because I can't help but wonder what his "seeing" my mother has meant to her seeing the people in her own ecosystem. She has been a lifelong educator, and she's done that by turning cartwheels for the people she encounters.

Coincidentally, Tillich wrote a book, one you should all read, entitled *The Courage to Be*. I'm forty-seven years old, I think a little younger than Tillich was when he met my mother, but I do know I'm old enough that my cartwheel wouldn't be much better than his! But I find myself in the stage of living seeking to find the courage to be the person God has ordained me to be – a person called to love God and neighbor. A person willing to turn cartwheels for the unseen.

And I reflect this morning, on a table in an upper room, in a nowhere spot in Jerusalem. Jesus gathered together disciples for a meal. He told them he loved them; he gave them every part of himself, all the while knowing he lived in a world that would trade his life for the likes of Barbaras; and that his friends would deny him for their own safety; even sell him out for twenty pieces of silver.

And yet, these friends of his, not quite yet ready to love God and neighbor with their whole selves, kept coming back to a table. Until one

Table Words (Maybe too many!!!)

Bob Stillerman

Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost, 11/10/2024

Mark 12:28-34



day, they had created a community where people broke their bread with glad and generous hearts, and they shared resources with each other as any had need, and they had all things in common, and they spent their days praising and glorifying the goodness of God.

Friends, I don't yet know what we have the courage to be, but I know that this table is a place where can find that courage. And I know, beyond all doubt, that we will one day be reconciled to God, and to one another. It seems to me that today is as good as any. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.