

Where Is the Love?

By Glenn Brumbaugh



When you think about your own faith, what is the priority or focus, what comes first?

Is it making sure you try to avoid sinning, to try to live a righteous life?

It is making sure that pray regularly, or attend worship

and/or bible study on a regular basis?

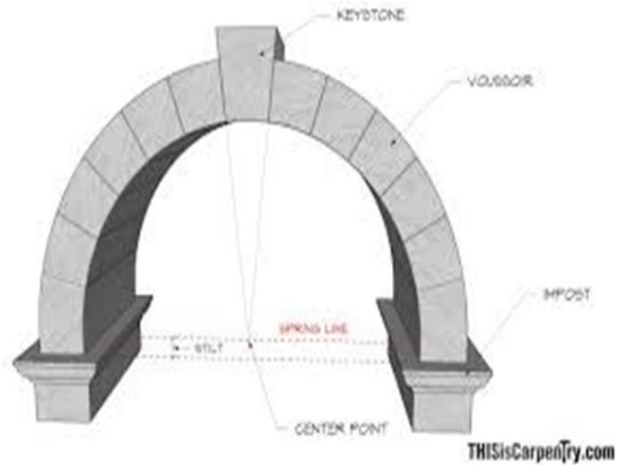
When we think about what is first, in what context do we define that?

In this election season, we probably would think in terms of what comes out on top,
who pulls ahead to win the race.

If you had siblings growing up, first meant having priority, being more important.

But in our text this morning, in this first century Jewish context,

first has more of a meaning of being “foundational.”



In other words, it's more like being the cornerstone, or keystone,
that holds the rest of the structure up.

It's not about being the most valued or liked among the other ones,

it's about being the one that supports the others up and defines them.

If we keep to our election analogy, it's not about beating out the other candidates, \

it's about making it possible for all the other candidates to do their jobs.

In our reading this morning, Jesus, when asked

what is the most important commandment of the 600 odd laws of the Torah is,

quotes Deuteronomy 6, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul

and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

As we heard in our first scripture reading this morning,

the ancient Israelites were told to make this the centerpiece of their faith life.

They were to keep those words in their hearts and recite them to their children,

to talk about them when you are home and away,

and to recite them morning and night.

They are even told to make them an emblem on their forehead
and a sign on their hand.

This piece of scripture is called the Shema Israel,
and was, and still is,

the centerpiece of the morning and evening prayers of the Jewish faith.

Some even take the last part about the forehead and hand literally.



If you've ever seen a devout Jewish man

with a little black leather box on his forehead

and a strap wrapped around his arm, that's what's in the little box,

the Shema.

But it is only natural for this to be selected as the most foundational

of all the 613 imperatives of the Torah.

God had chosen Israel to be God's people.

God established a covenant, a commitment to bless them,

and followed through on that commitment

in rescuing them from bondage in Egypt

and delivering them to a new land, "flowing with milk and honey."

They expressed their eternal gratitude for the grace and benevolence of God

by returning that love and grace in their full commitment to God.

There would be little disagreement among Jewish religious figures,

of which Jesus was one, that this commandment

is the most foundational to their faith and very identity as God's people.

Many of the Jewish scholars of Jesus' time, like Philo of Alexandria,

saw the ten commandments as a summary of the Torah

divided between responsibilities toward God, or piety,

and responsibilities towards people, or justice.

So it wasn't so far-fetched

that Jesus came up with the commandment from Leviticus 19:18

to "love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus sees this question as identifying what theology is foundational for the faith,

what laws form the foundation on which all other concepts are built upon.

He focuses on the love shown by God, and reciprocated in gratitude by humans.

The expectation from that relationship is that humans will then show

that same selfless, agape love to each other,

being in loving relationship with each other

in the same way that God is in relationship with us.

The scribe agrees and indicates the misguided emphasis
of the Jewish faith of the time on the proper sacrifices to ensure faithfulness.

He echoes the sentiment of Micah in that God prefers us
to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly
over a thousand ram sacrifices and rivers of oil.

This story is sandwiched between a number of dialogues
between Jesus and the various religious authorities.

Preceding this, Jesus had cleansed the Temple of the money changers
and in the next section, he criticizes the Temple authorities of exploiting widows.

He is critical of the entire Temple structure
and how it uses it's position and authority to exploit people.

The prevailing thought of the time was that one could buy one's forgiveness for sins
by purchasing the proper sacrifice at the Temple;
that there was a sliding scale to sin
and one had to get the right level of sacrifice to atone
for whatever transgression they sought absolution for.

Which is probably why Jesus tells the scribe he is thoughtful,
and that he is "not far from the kingdom of God,"
implying that he's on the right track, but not quite there yet.
After all, he is a scribe. He is part of the Temple structure,
those who take advantage of others because of their position.
He gets the importance and meaning of loving God and neighbor
as superceding the importance of sacrifice,
but his own life doesn't reflect those values.

So here we are, two millenia later.

We don't have a temple and animal sacrifices.

As a Protestant church from the Radical Reformation,

we don't have temple authorities who control our access to God and redemption.

You don't come to me to exchange your money to purchase rams or doves for me to sacrifice,

for which I am thankful as butchering is not high on my list of fun ways

to spend my Saturdays.

The question is, are we still bogged down by that same way of thinking?

Do we focus on ourselves, making sure we've made the proper sacrifices in our lives

to negate or avoid our sin?

Are we focused on all the individual behaviors of the 613 imperatives in the First Testament,

trying to make sure we meet the legal requirements of entry into God's kingdom?

Or is it about the love?

The one word that connects both of these commandments is agape love:

selfless love for God and for our neighbor as ourselves.

Whatever we make of Jesus' "backhanded compliment,"

the scribe correctly affirmed kingdom priorities.

The kingdom ethic is to love God and love our neighbor.

It is that simple though it is far from simple; easy to grasp perhaps,

but can be difficult to live.

The kingdom is rooted, grounded and expressed in love:

God's love for us, our love for God and our love for each other.

It is rather sobering, however, to consider whether, possibly like the scribe,

we are "not far from the kingdom of God."

Is it possible that we might affirm but not practice the two greatest commands?

Is it possible that we might know better but we don't do better?

Is it possible that we know about God but we don't know God
as people who love our neighbors?

Is it possible, I wonder, whether we know the commandments
but we are so enmeshed in the structures of oppression and injustice
(much like the scribes in the temple; like those living under Jim Crow
or in southern slave states)
that we don't even recognize that we fail to love our neighbors
even as we insist that we do?

Wherever we find ourselves, what is clear is that love is to be the foundation,
the cornerstone of our faith.

Is that the lens we use?

In our own time, there are plenty of examples of people of power and authority
taking advantage of the vulnerable of our own time,
our version of the widows of Jesus' day.

Do we side with those who are callous and cruel because they are more like us,
or is how they love others our filter?

Are our own priorities our finances, our stuff, everything in our own little bubble,
or is it what new way we can express our love and concern for our neighbor,
who is everybody else besides us.

Leadership Magazine carried a story about 4 young men, Bible College students,
who were renting a house together.

One Saturday morning someone knocked on their door.

And when they opened it, there stood this bedraggled-looking old man.



His eyes were kind of marbled, & he had a silvery stub of whiskers on his face.

His clothes were ragged & torn.

His shoes didn't match.

In fact, they were both for the same foot.

And he carried a wicker basket full of unappealing vegetables that he was trying to sell.

The boys felt sorry for him & bought some of his vegetables just to help him out.

Then he went on his way.

But from that time on, every Saturday he appeared at their door

with his basket of vegetables.

As the boys got to know him a little bit better,

they began inviting him in to visit a while before continuing on his rounds.

They soon discovered that his eyes looked marbled,

not because of drugs or alcohol, but because of cataracts.

They learned that he lived just down the street in an old shack.

They also found out that he could play the harmonica,

& that he loved to play Christian hymns,

& that he really loved God.

So every Saturday they would invite him in, & he would play his harmonica

& they would sing Christian hymns together.

They became good friends, & the boys began trying to figure out ways to help him.

One Saturday morning, the story says, right in the middle of all their singing & praising,

he suddenly said to them, "God is so good!" And they all agreed,

"Yes, God is so good." He went on, "You know why he is so good?"

They said, "Why?"

He said, "Because yesterday, when I got up & opened my door,

there were boxes full of clothes & shoes & coats & gloves.

Yes, God is so good!"

And the boys smiled at each other & chimed in, "Yes, God is so good."

He went on, "You know why He is so good?"

They answered, "You already told us why. What more?"

He said, "Because I found a family who could use those things,

& I gave them all away."

Both sides of this story have a faith based on love.

However, you could argue the boys at the beginning

were like the scribe in our scripture today,

they weren't looking through a love lens at first.

It sounds like it was a little more like a judgement lens.

They made assumptions because of his eyes and clothing

and didn't lovingly see the beautiful child of God in front of them.

We face many controversial issues in our world today.

Jesus makes how we approach them very clear.

If it is with love for the other, then it's right, it's what our faith is to be build upon.

If it is with any other lens like judgement,

then we need to change our focus and ask ourselves [where is the love?](#)

Amen.