

Mark 12:28-34 Common English Bible (CEB) Romans 8:38 (CEB)

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Just Like You ²⁹ Jesus replied, “The most important one is *Israel*, listen! Our God is the one Lord,³⁰ and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength.^[a] ³¹ If he had a microphone, he could have dropped it – what else is there to say!

This is the Schma, the prayer, from Deut 6: 4-5, that declares who, how and what we worship as the people of God. Jesus betrays himself to not one of his critics in this moment - they were all Jews, and they all would know this scriptural reference.

But he goes on to admonish them and he says: second is this, *You will love your neighbor as yourself.*^[b] No other commandment is greater than these.” Jesus tagged this onto the Shema prayer and he quoted, Leviticus 19:18. The full text being: ¹⁸ You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord your God.

He knew his scriptures for the religious expert could find no fault in his answer. Was it off the cuff ///// or was he ready for the test, the intended attack to prove him a fool? Because the intent in the question was not to learn more and other spiritual giftedness from this very spiritual man who was causing all the ruckus... but rather to entrap him. To remove him, discredit him, to have him seem less than in the eyes of the Jews that supported him because they were causing all the trouble that he was stirring up, ... not to treat him with love and respect as a

fellow human being but to treat a fellow devoted man of faith with intent to harm. Jesus added that Leviticus line with a great deal of skill and spiritual intention – remember, friend, we do not hurt one another because we are not so different, you and I... I am just like you.

He was speaking to the scribes, Pharisees etc and continually proving to them they really had nothing to fear from him – he did not cast aspersions at them, and he could have. He did not report them to the Roman authorities for what ever they were doing to **ruin** the team of faithful that lived within the occupied territory – he could have.

He treated the violence that met him in this moment, with scripture, - He was saying to them, see, I am just like you. And you are just like me – we can all operate in this life out of faith, love and graciousness. He was present to it constantly in this walk, this particular challenge, but here in this moment when he shares the ancient Hebrew text with his fellow Jews, he allows such grace and creates this big space for them to enter in and stop fighting. I am just like you! We are not different – we are all children of the Creator - He creates this opportunity, this moment that says, hold on, you don't have to hate me because I am one of you. I know the scriptures, too, and we truly have nothing to fight about. I am devoted to the good in this world and the next – can you see it in me? They clearly refused to join...

But in this statement of pulling together two ancient texts, that all in hearing range would have known, he made his identity as a Jew very plain if it was not before. He was not looking to “one up” someone, as

if to say – “I know more than you do, I am more important than you are” or outwit anyone – he was modeling the behavior of the faithful – who looked to the traditions and Word of God for answers to conflicts and **unity in** difference – by naming there really is no difference that cannot be dealt with – even if it means in an eternal, heavenly way.

We do not know if there were different shades of skin color, how many cultures were blending at this point in the sociology of the place and moment in time – because like the USA – there was blending and races mixed through marriage and children. There are many examples of it in our bible stories – Jesus lineage in Matthew’s gospel tells the story – just think of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz – lots of blending culture and race and tribe, and there is more for another day. We only know, they were all Jews, the same in God’s eyes. They all pray the same prayers and read the same scripture...

So the scribe goes on to say – Oh, all right so you do know your stuff... huh – well that is a surprise. I have heard that about you (In his mind) that you surprise people. You have surprised and impressed me – so, I am not going to ask any more questions! I can see him going back to the religious leadership saying – that was my best shot – your turn, if you want him – you go after him yourself.

They did not, as we know, stop fighting, they fought on to his torture and death – but here he is, giving a centerpiece for the faithful to hang their hats on – as we do today. And I imagine there were plenty of folks who turned to the market to buy and sell goods as this “test” was taking place, or sushed their children in the doors of their homes if they witnessed the exchange and said, “this is not about us – turn away..” So,

when the fight began in public, such as these confrontations between Jesus and the establishment, there were onlookers who were not involved. They choose to not learn what was happening, to stay neutral – and I know I am painting with a very broad brush stroke, but Elie Wiesel said: The opposite of peace is apathy - and as Elie Wiesel stated:

"Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

Elie Wiesel

I wonder how many people really did not care? We shall never know, of course because that is not the main message of the story. The main message was the greatest commandment, pulled together from the faith tradition they all knew: Love God with everything you are – then love neighbor and love yourself. Huge, right? Or, are we just onlookers with no compulsion, to compassion for the oppressed, in whatever form?

The institutional church cannot be onlookers and pretend to be neutral – and I really do understand we are involved, we speak out, we stand up in resistance – you have already demonstrated this. Our denomination faces this question in the course of love and human sexuality, as we are only one of 736 congregations that have said, all means all. Praise be to God. We in the UMC await the commission that seeks the “way forward” and I pray it is one of accepting our differences. I pray it is one of loving us for our differences for this is how we learn and grow in spiritual truth and goodness by the power of the holy spirit. You have demonstrated a core value of love against an institution that seeks to interpret love very differently – and I am so proud of you for this – and

for my church, I won't lie, it hurts me that we have this position which to me, lacks love. If you do not share this view and are sitting here today – I do not judge and I hope I am not judged. We are all here for peace and love through grace and that is what makes us the same and willing to live side by side in our differences and similarities. We are all of us complex persons... Amen?

So to remind us all of just one example of how this notion of courageous faith when the spiritual questions bubble up in our hearts and minds because we are informed by the love of a cosmic truth: When have we been confronted by something that is oddly or blatantly offensive to the soul because it is an effort of destruction; and it gets less easy when the issue is not by the one who is very different than we are, but by the one who look the same, read the same bible, worships on Sunday morning as we do? What is this idea of white nationalism – it is incomprehensible to me. What is this idea of women sabotaging women in the work place, or in their own families – I do not understand. But it is real and faithfully, we can be a part of the transformation of hearts if we can find a way to model the love we all seek. This is what it was like for Jesus I think when he was confronted by the scribe.

What if we reminded ourselves that even though we are attacked, we can find a way to say – why are you fighting – I'm just like you? Can we remember God resides in places and people we seem to have confusion over? It is so tempting and feels so right to shout back but that is like eating a third donut, it only really feels good for a moment in the mouth

the hell to pay a bit later on. I realize it is not so binary, not so black and white, not so one over another...but it is a question worth pondering. Can we remember God resides in places and people we seem to have confusion over? Would Jesus get into that conversation and say, hold on, I m just like you...

I was at a gathering with a woman who looked enough like me, white lady, fair hair etc., and near my age, a bit younger – married, children etc...and there was a conversation about selling a car. She had a car for sale and I was engaging her to see what her process was and just make earnest conversation about a milestone – selling a car is not nothing, right? Anyhow, she said at one point: I think I will go to xxxxx – some area near a central NY city, that I will not name, the N=bomb word down there will buy anything. *She was so matter of fact, I nearly fell over.* I must have made her feel so comfortable that she thought it would be ok to say this – and I think I kept my jaw from falling but said, “Agnes, *not her real name*, never speak like that around me again. She looked so surprised, pulled her chin into her face and said – well, its true! As though I was stupid and should have known this – I said, never use that language around me, again. Ever. And I just walked away. It was over 15 years ago and I had less training that I have now - I wish I had more presence than to walk away. This is what I am hoping you and I will journey with. If it is a safety issue, well, walk away – scripture allows this – dust off your sandals and move on to the next town (Mark 6:11 and the synoptics have their version) – but if there is a nudge to stay, the holy spirit might be telling your something there, too.

I am over walking away. I hope you will join me, our differences in personalities accepted. But I am going to seek to bravely engage in the conversations of race and unity, DACA and justice, Nazi, Neo-nazi's, racists and all the haters – need to know where the boundaries are and if we keep marking them with love we are allowing the holy spirit's transformation to take place through us as hosts, ambassadors, perhaps in our little bit of time here on the planet, we can, by the power of the holy spirit because it is never just us without the cosmic force of love and truth – perhaps learn to love more deeply. It will be easy, and difficult, and lovely, and messy. It will be a way to get a little closer to God and God's work in our moment in time.

Then perhaps, through that love, we will usher souls to what God actually is speaking to the haters - I cannot say what that is, but I am certain it is not hate and destruction. I am certain through my faith and the belief in the goodness of God, that life is precious and not to be wasted, that there are words of comfort and inspiration that guide us, and some of them are here in our Romans Text to add to our Mark's gospel because no matter how awful any of us are, we are all of us redeemable through the mercy of Jesus, Paul knew this for he was guilty, of leadership in murder, persecution of the Jesus people, he was a hater in general and he was forgiven. Indeed, in the KJV version of the NT 28% of the verses are either authentic letters or attributed to Paul – a lot of words guiding us today from a guy who was a transformed hater.

Basic conversation and witness did not reach him – I have no doubt that the people he tortured and persecuted begged him to love and see the truth in all things and that this hate was not it! No, it took being blinded by the light – then healed by the ones he was on the way to arrest, wandering off to the desert some stay in solitude for years – and in that time, he was bathed in mercy and devoted his life to that call from the God of creation – devoted to sharing the good news of forgiveness through Christ, to helping other people learn how to hear the love of God he knew, so off he went to Asia minor and near the end of his life, after 30+ years of working, walking, preaching, jail, shipwrecks and wandering, in the light of the forgiveness he received, he wrote: for I am convinced that neither death nor life etc...can keep us from the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Nothing – not even the hate and war that people insist upon generation after generation. And to demonstrate it – we respond to disaster.

Right now, as of this writing, people are being helped in Texas and all who have been in Irma's path, including Florida. They are helping because, why? Are we checking ID's for status, or age, or skin color? For profession or confession of faith? Or, is everyone helping everyone? I know it is the latter. UMCOR and RED CROSS are on site – we will be called upon to go if we want to go and start in the loving repair work. We have already been sending donations. There are problems and it is a real disaster – but people are figuring out what they can do to help one another survive...helping not hurting. The best of us is happening. Sadly, this is not the norm. We do not always stay and help with an

earnestness that lights up the sky with inspiration. But we can. We are capable of this, because we are doing it. I am just like you – let me help.

When have we faced, with surprise, the differences that we choose to walk away from, rather than resist with love and elegant grace as Jesus did in this moment as he spoke to the scribe?

Again, he was not accepting differences between cultures or races at this moment, which we know he did also, – he was speaking directly to those who were most like him. What can we take from this? How shall we learn to love in the face of hate and destruction? Shall we take this seriously? I believe we can.

We are going to engage in a book discussion to begin a process of informing us about scripture, sociology, theology and more through the Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and his book: Not In God's Name. I will be preaching from it and Mark's Gospel the next four weeks. I invite you to join me during fellowship and to decide on a time to gather for the discussion. I think it could be a stepping off point for how we face the notion of violence, peace and hope in our lifetimes with active love.

I know you are not haters, I have experienced your love and kindness, welcoming and openness to a new pastor and her family. I hope you will join me on this journey of seeking a way to behave like the grace we have received is motivation to try something new in the quest for transformational love with self, and neighbor, because we are so loved by the Lord our God – that nothing can separate us from it. Just like you, he said – shall we believe it? Praise be to God.

Today, in the US, our human community is diverse

³² The legal expert (the religious legal expert) said to him, “Well said, Teacher. You have truthfully said that God is one and there is no other besides him. (we are together on this and it is clear you do not wander into the romand tempole t make an offering to Ceasar...)³³ And to love God with all of the heart, a full understanding, and all of one’s strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself is much more important than all kinds of entirely burned offerings and sacrifices.” What a confesion! You must imagine that was something to have confessed, as he, the scribe, acknowledged the cleverness of Jesus’ answer.

³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered with wisdom, he said to him, “You aren’t far from God’s kingdom.” After that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

So next week we will launch into this discussion and for those of you who would like to join this book discussion – Not in God’s Name by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, I would welcome the conversation.

We are going to look at religious violence, Jonathan Sacks and weave it through the journey Jesus has in Mark’s gospel, because it is a collective statement against empire and oppression – including the haters as we have talked about this morning – but he met with faith and calm, his

oppressors. I thank you for your willingness to journey with this topic because I think it is brave and I pray we will all be not only more informed, but a bit closer to a sense of God's truth in our lives and how our gifts and graces can be used to make something a little bit better for God's glory in our corner of the world. Praise be to God. Amen.