

THERE'S LIFE BEYOND DISCOMFORT  
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church  
in Brookfield, Connecticut  
on November 3, 2024

Text: Mark 12:28-34

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?" Jesus answered, "The first 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." 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'; 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." 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.

What jumped out to me in the gospel reading today is the very last line: "After that no one dared to ask him any question." What did Jesus do that made people so afraid that they never dared to ask him a question ever again? What did he say that was so terrifying?

This isn't the first time people have done this. All throughout the gospels, we run into people who ask Jesus a question, and when they hear the answer, they stop engaging with him. They end the conversation. Sometimes it's the Pharisees—the religious authorities of the day. They'll try to trick Jesus into saying something they can use against him, and then he'll turn it around and make them look bad, and then they'll go away in a huff. Other times it's ordinary people. They'll ask Jesus an honest question, something about the life of faith, and when he gives them the answer, they'll get upset because it's not what they wanted to hear, and then they'll go away grieving.

What's odd about the reading today is that Jesus isn't making anyone look like bad, and

he isn't saying anything that's difficult or challenging. He's talking about love—love for God and love for neighbor—and he's saying that's the heart of the law. That's what Jewish faith comes down to. I don't know about you, but I can't think of anything less terrifying than that.

So why, then, does the man who asked Jesus the question in the first place, Which commandment is the greatest? not want to ask him anything more? Why does he cut the conversation off instead of taking it further? Because that would've been the natural thing for him to do. Asking questions and engaging in debate was how religious leaders in Jesus' day taught and learned. Rabbis would sit around arguing with each other about how to interpret the scriptures. They'd go back and forth and really get into the weeds. In fact, that's still the case today.

I have a friend who went to Union Seminary in New York, which is on the upper west side right across the street from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and she was telling me the other day that when the

rabbinical students would get together, that's what they'd do. They'd get into these intense theological debates that would go on and on and sometimes get pretty heated. They'd take some theological issue and go round and round until they'd exhausted every possible line of argument. And then they'd go have a beer together.

So why don't we see that kind of thing happening in this story? Is it just because once Jesus says what the greatest commandment is, there's nothing more to talk about? Is it really that simple? I don't think so. Because when Jesus tells the man he's not far from the kingdom of God, doesn't that sound like someone playing a game of hot and cold? Doesn't that sound like someone leading someone else to whatever it is they're looking for?

When Jesus says that to the man, I think he's trying to draw him into a bigger discussion. I think he's trying to get him to go beyond where he is. He's a scribe. He's an expert on the scriptures. His job is to study them. So he knows perfectly well what the heart of the law is. He knows perfectly well what Jewish faith comes down to. He doesn't need Jesus to tell him that. But what is it that he's still missing? What is it that he still doesn't see? What is it that's still holding him back? That's where Jesus wants to take this conversation. But the man's not willing to go there. Instead of opening up the dialogue, he shuts it down. And for me the question is Why?

The story doesn't give us a clear answer, but I think we can figure it out. When the man asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is, Jesus gives the textbook response: "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"—just like it says in Deuteronomy. And then he throws in the second greatest commandment: "love your neighbor as yourself."

"Good job," the man says. "You get a gold star." And he's happy to leave it at that. For him, this is just an exercise. It's purely academic. But for Jesus, it's something more. He wants to take it further. "You're getting warmer," he says. "The thing you're looking for is around here somewhere. Keep searching until you find it."

Jesus wants to do more than just demonstrate his knowledge. He wants to take that knowledge and apply it to real life. What does it mean to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself? What would that actually look like? How would it change your values, your priorities, your relationships? And what if everyone started doing this? What would that mean for our communities, our nation, our world? How would it transform society on a cultural level, a political level, an economic level, even a religious level?

Jesus wants to pursue that line of thought all the way to the end, which is the emergence of a new reality he calls the kingdom of God—a reality that reflects God's will and God's ways, not our will and our ways. And that's when the man is like, "Nope, not gonna go there." Why? Because it's too uncomfortable.

As long as they're just talking, the man is fine. He'll stand there debating with Jesus all day long. But as soon as things start getting real, he's outta there. As soon as he realizes Jesus is serious about changing how we live and following God with our whole selves, he's done asking questions. Which is too bad because he's right on the edge of something wonderful—something he's missing, even though he can't quite put his finger on what it is; something he's longing for, even though he tells himself he's already got everything he needs.

That's always the hardest thing. That's always the biggest challenge—stepping out of our comfort zones and trusting that

there's something better waiting for us; letting God come into the lives we've made for ourselves and lead us into a life that's bigger. We're so attached to what we know, to what's familiar, to the way things have always been, even though we can't escape the feeling that there's something more. We all have our textbook responses that we cling to, even though they're just words until we put them into practice.

I think what this story is telling us is that there's life beyond discomfort. There's promise beyond doubt. There's joy beyond fear. There's reward beyond risk. But we'll never know until we're ready to stick around and have that more serious conversation with Jesus. We'll never know until we're ready to go there.

And the good news is, if we're not quite ready today, tomorrow is another opportunity. The door never closes. Jesus is always there to tell us, "You're getting warmer. The thing you're looking for is around here somewhere. Keep searching until you find it." Amen.