



“Simple Things”

Texts: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and Mark 12:28-44

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

“Sh’ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad!”

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

If there is a more important prayer in the Jewish tradition, I do not know what it would be. The Shema is the central statement of what it means to be a Jew. It is the first prayer a child is taught - not unlike our prayer of “now I lay me down to sleep.” Its importance is shown in the teaching that has evolved over time that the Shema is the first prayer that is to be prayed every morning and the last prayer to be prayed every night and, in some traditions of Judaism, it is prayed with greater frequency every day. It is both call to worship and statement of faith.

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

In 1945, Rabbi Eliezer Silver was sent to Europe to help reclaim Jewish children who had been hidden during the Holocaust with non-Jewish families. The question was as to how he would discover these children. So, he devised a plan. He would go to gatherings of children and loudly proclaim Shema Yisrael - "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.". Then he would look at the faces of the children for those with tears in their eyes - those children whose distant memory of being Jewish was their mothers putting them to bed each night and saying the Shema with them. (<https://www.aish.com/jl/m/pb/48954656.html>).

Countless stories are told of Jews facing persecution - and death - speaking the words of the Shema as they were led away into exile, led away to be placed on trains bound for concentration camps, even when being led away to the gas chambers. The Shema is the touchstone - the measure - the fullest measure and foundational statement of faith:

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

So, you can imagine my surprise when I got to college and discovered that these words were not the words of Jesus. In all those years in the Presbyterian Church Sunday School, when we got to the story that we heard again this morning of the scribe asking Jesus about the first and greatest commandment, no one bothered to tell us that Jesus was not creating original material, but was, instead, referring back to his own Sunday School training, and being taught the Shema. No one thought it important to point out that the two greatest commandments were from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Do a Google search today of the words “love your neighbor as yourself,” and the first reference will be to Mark 12 and the second reference will be to Leviticus 19. At best, this is gross negligence and, at worst, the reality of anti-Semitism in the church - then and now.

When pressed by the scribe, who knew the Torah as well as Jesus, if not better, Jesus gives him the first lesson of any good and faithful Jew: “Sh’ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad!” The first lesson is the main lesson - the never-ending lesson - the great lesson.

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

Immediately, on the heels of this statement, comes and unsolicited response from Jesus.

“The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Again, Jesus did not invent the sentiment, nor did he coin the words. Visit Leviticus 19:17-18 and you will find them there. Jesus knew the words, as did his interviewer, the scribe. And Jesus knew the lesson, as did his interviewer, the scribe.

The first story of creation reminds us that we are created “in the image of God.” In Hebrew, “b’tzelem Elohim.” When speaking of this key idea, Rabbi Art Green reminds us:

It is not only a description of our creative powers; it is also a statement of responsibility about the way that we treat others. Do we see God in them? Do we recognize that all people are created in this image, not just famous people or people who can serve us in some way?

The image of God, in which all people are created, is the common bond that unites us as a human family. It leaves no one behind, any more than we would leave one of our own dear ones behind. It ignores no one, any more than we would ignore a child, a parent, or a spouse. It takes advantage of no one, any more than we would take advantage of one who is connected to our heart and soul.

Now, bring all of that to this moment. We are in the second week of the chaos that is the Covid-19 reality. While some dismissed it as a hoax, just days ago, the reality of thousands being affected, a rising death count, the shuttering of schools, businesses, and public spaces - all speak to the new reality of our day.

The teachings that are before us from long ago are speaking to us today. Because we are called to “love our neighbor as ourself,” we are taking all these precautions and significant steps to “flatten the curve” - to reduce the number of people who will contract the coronavirus. We are called to live our faith - our belief in the “b’tzelem Elohim” - that we are created in the image of God as are all other people - and that means we are called to see others and recognize them as of equal importance and value to ourselves. We are called to the holy work of physical distancing, because we do not want anyone to contract the disease. We are called to minimize outside contact for a while, in order to let the infection rates decrease and protect all, but especially the vulnerable and those at risk of infection and complications. Yes, I know, the governmental authorities are imposing mandates left and right. And yes, those restrictions should be observed for the good and noble purpose of reducing the impact of the virus. But, you and I - as people of faith - are called to this new and challenging way of living because we value all people as created in the image of God. Our actions grow from the soil of our belief in the instruction to “love our neighbor as ourself.”

And we are called to “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” This is the foundation of our lives. The Lord is God - the Lord alone, as one translation gives it to us. That means that God alone is God and everything else - isn’t. Fear is not God. Hoarding is not God. Scarcity is not God. Half-truths and outright lies are not God. The Coronavirus is not God.

Our faith in God - our trust in God - our certainty in God’s presence and care - our absolute conviction of God’s reality and truth - has no peer in our lives. We sing, with the Psalmist, “I am persuaded that your love is established forever and you have set your faithfulness in the heavens.” (Psalm 89:2). We claim for ourselves the words of the Psalmist:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;

God will help it when the morning dawns.

The LORD of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Life in these strange days is more than complicated. There is so much that needs to be done in different ways than “normal.” It is taxing, and tiring, and even a little terrifying.

But let me give you two simple things - simple reminders - basic lessons.

“The Lord is our God - the Lord alone.”

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Work on that this week, won't you? Trust in God alone and love your neighbor.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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