

***Sermon For: 11/04/18***

**Scripture: Ruth 1:1-18, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9:11-14, Mark 12:28-34**

“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.’”

Good Morning!

People have always pondered the meaning of life. All kinds of ideas have been offered. Recent philosophers have leaned toward pragmatism. Gandhi suggested, “live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.” Confucius says, “Wherever you go, go with all your heart.” And we do not know who was the first to say, “Life is a journey.”

Many have contemplated life’s meaning and come away depressed. In Eugene Ionesco’s play, *The Chairs*, an old man prepares to give a summary of his philosophy. Out of his years of living, he has distilled his wisdom into a single speech, which he wants everyone from the simple folk to the emperor to hear. He hires a professional orator to make the speech for him. When the speaker finally arrives on stage, the suspense is terrific. The audience is about to hear the meaning of life. He stands with his back to the listeners composing himself. Then he turns to deliver the old man’s message. The speaker is struck silent. He cannot speak a single word. It’s the playwright’s way of presenting the emptiness he believes lies at the heart of existence. Life has no meaning.

Fortunately for us, Jesus is more hopeful. On this occasion He is teaching in Jerusalem, spending the morning in a theological cross-examination free-for-all. After debating the chief priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, and other assorted defenders of the letter of the law. Jesus is ready to go home, but an unnamed scribe has been listening carefully. He has been hanging around the edge of the crowd growing in admiration for the way Jesus handles the tough questions about taxes and the resurrection. The scribes are usually the bad guys in the gospels, wise guys trying to trip Jesus up, but this is an honest scribe with an honest question who gets an honest answer.

He asks Jesus a big question, a meaning of life question, “Which commandment is the most important?” In Judaism there was a tendency to expand the law into hundreds of rules and regulations. The Torah contains 613 commandments, 365 things they could not do and 248 things they had to do. But they also tended to try to gather up the law into a single sentence.

Jesus gives a familiar answer. Devout worshippers recited this first commandment three times a day. All the other laws are judged on the basis of this one supreme law. The key for Jesus is not so much in finding the right answer. It has been there all along. It is really not a question of information but one of transformation. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.

That is the center, the well spring of all that we do. “With all your soul,” that is your feeling and will. The soul gives life. “With all your mind,” that is what you think and believe. “With all your strength,” is all that you are.

Love of God is the central teaching of Christianity. Righteousness is not strict obedience to a complex set of laws. The one commandment is that we love God with every aspect of our lives. We should give all our ambitions, emotions, thoughts, and commitments to God. It sounds simple, but of course, it is not.

“All my heart.” I cannot even keep all my ambitions straight to give them to God. Every time I think I know what I want, I see someone with a gift I did not get, and it makes me want a better deal.

“All my emotions.” Some days I do better than others, I have offered unwanted advice to drivers who have no idea that they just cut me off.

“All my thoughts.” Forget about it. My thoughts are all over the place. Does it make any of you feel less guilty to know that sometimes during the sermon I wonder what I am having for my next meal.

“All my strength.” I tend to talk a better game than I play. My commitment seems empty when much of my energy is spent on myself.

Loving God at times seems impractical, and mystical. God seems to be only at the edges of our thoughts. There are times when we do not pay much attention, though we are glad that God is there. But, when we give God a mere fraction of ourselves, God becomes a mere fraction of who God should be to us.

We need a guiding passion, because traveling without a clear direction leads to frustration. Think of your life as drawing a circle with a compass. If you get the center right, then the circumference will come out fine. But until the center is set, it will never work.

For centuries, the earth was thought to be the center of the universe. Then Copernicus who was resisted and persecuted, argued that the sun was at the center and for astronomers all the old assumptions had to change. When we follow this command and place God at the center of our universe, everything changes. If God is at the center, the rest will follow.

Sometimes Christians think the big question is, “Do you believe in God?” It is not. The big question is, “Do we love God?” Jesus said our attention needs to go beyond us, beyond our families, beyond our jobs, beyond our church, to God. For

those of us who attend multiple services, we need to ensure that our services do not become routine. When I returned to church after many years, I knew when to kneel, when to stand, when to cross myself. It was very routine. I had to learn that the love of God is the absorbing center that gives our lives meaning.

Love God with all that we are, do, feel, and think. If we make loving God our goal, we will have fuller lives. We will move from the many things to seeking the one grace. We will be free from the compulsion of the world and set our hearts on the only necessary thing.

We can love God in so many wonderful ways. What would our lives look like if we acted as if God was the only one watching? Find your own best ways to love God. Some people love God in music, some in the harvesting of a garden, some in sharing freshly baked bread, and others in affectionate words to a friend. Utter your own prayer in the language of your own heart. Set aside a time and place to give God your undivided attention. Be mad about God in the silence of your own soul. Tell God that you are crazy about God in words and actions. Thank God in worship for what has given you joy. Go beyond just thinking on the love of God and feel it deeply and passionately. Be grateful to God for the closeness of God and the greatness of God. Do not try to love God like you have heard other people do. Let your adoration be your own. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, you soul, your mind, and your strength. Live as if God is the only one watching.

Amen!