

“The Wholeness of Love”  
delivered Sunday, November 8, 2009  
by Rev. Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet  
Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC  
Mark 12:28-34

Not long before she died, Mother Teresa spoke to the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. Having spent her life ministering among the poorest of the poor, she was introduced to that gathering as “the greatest woman in the world.” With swift humility she dismissed that introduction by saying that if she were the greatest woman in the world, you would think that God would have made her tall enough to see over the podium behind which she was standing. But then she went on to say, “I am nothing close to being the greatest woman in the world, but I will tell you the greatest thing about my life. I have been able to be a tiny pencil in the hand of God, someone through whom God writes love letters to the world.” (1)

We are living in a time when we so desperately need people through whom God’ writes love letters to the world. The horrible tragedy in Fort Hood, Texas, on Thursday, with so many shot and killed in a place that is supposed to be safe, the escalating toll of lives lost in Afghanistan in the last month, the kidnappings and murder and violence against people, the degradation of the earth – all add up to a desperate need for God’s children to be living love letters for the sake of the world.

Love is the essential message of the gospel; indeed it the essential core of all the great monotheistic religions, and yet religion itself is so often corrupted to proclaim something other than God’s love for the world. Charles Kimball, an ordained Baptist minister and professor at Wake Forest University, teaches the history of religion with a specialization in the Middle East and Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations. His book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, is a helpful analysis of the time in which we find ourselves. Kimball begins by saying that religion is a powerful force which has inspired individuals and whole communities to transcend narrow self-interest in pursuit of higher values and truths. Religion, he asserts, is often the source of noble acts of love, self-sacrifice and service. But Kimball goes on to show that whatever religious people may say about their love of God, when their behavior toward others is violent and destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure that religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed. We see this every where we look among the world’s great religions, even within our own Christian faith. A careful reading of Kimball’s book shows how even the best kind of religious faithfulness can dip into these warning signs and cause great harm. (2) You don’t have to be a Muslim extremist to corrupt the faith, there are all kinds of mean and exclusive practices that well-meaning Christians adhere to – racism, intolerance, exploitation, oppression of the other, sheer neglect of our neighbors in need – just to name a few.

This is why it is ever important for us to visit and revisit a text like the one before us today about the central message of the gospel. As we trace Jesus’ footsteps through Mark, along the way, and with more and more urgency toward the end of his life, he is inviting all those who follow him to be people through whom God can write love letters to the world. By the time we reach these verses in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark, Jesus is found in the middle of a kind of theological cross-examination where the religious leaders are trying to get at the core meaning of the faith. Priests, scribes, and elders are swarming all over Jesus in a frenzy of entrapment. He has entered Jerusalem with a parade of followers cheering for him as a new kind of religious leader. They are calling him the Son of David, and the pressure is on the old time religious

authorities to stake their claim on who's who and what's right when it comes to core matters of faith.

Just prior to our reading for today, questions have been fired at Jesus about such things as...paying taxes to Caesar when Caesar demands a form of pagan worship of himself as emperor, and about what happens after we die -- in an attempt to settle a centuries old dispute between the Pharisees who believed in the resurrection and the Sadducees who did not. These were the kinds of difficult questions that religious folk wanted answers to, cut and dried, black and white, and nobody seemed to like Jesus' spin that comes with his answers. He is a little too open-ended, more willing to tell a story in order to help people think for themselves, more interested in letting God be God in mysterious ways that transcend human understanding. About the taxes, you remember what he said; he said, "Pay the tax, but give that which is made in the image of God to God." Meaning...you and every bit of you...pay Caesar that tax, but give yourself to God. About the resurrection, he said, "it won't be a continuation of this life in some pie in the sky kind of way, where we will be related to one another as we are now - rather, in the resurrection, we will be changed." Well...you know it was hard for a scribe in those days to take that kind of answer back to the Temple and explain what Jesus meant exactly. Because what he was saying had to be filtered through what God was doing in him, in Jesus, and the people who were peppering him with these questions did not yet believe that God was in Jesus. Through me, Jesus was trying to get across to them, God is loving the world in a whole new way.

So at this moment of trying to distill religious truth claims down to the bare essentials, a scribe steps forward. His question is THE question. It's the lets-get-down-to-the heart of the matter Torah question: Which commandment is the first of all? Jesus lifts two commandments out of his Jewish heritage, one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus, and hands them down side by side with this introduction: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Before the commandment for us to love is given, those listening to Jesus are called to remember how God has already loved us: God, who created us, called us into covenant community, freed us from slavery, led us through the wilderness into the land, corrected us with justice, and who is now revealed to us in Jesus Christ, is one Lord our God. The commandment for us to love God is given only after Jesus reminds the community of faith of all that God is and all that God does for us in love. Love doesn't just happen. "The amniotic fluid of human love is the creative, redemptive love and mercy of God." (3)

All of us together, as recipients of the wondrous love of God, are then commanded: "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, and... You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." Stunned perhaps by the clarity of Jesus' response, the scribe compliments Jesus for being "right on" and then stammers through a paraphrase of what he has just heard. Jesus praises him for understanding that there is a wholeness, a oneness, a completeness, about God's love which invites our whole response. After that, the gospel writer Mark informs us, no one else dared ask Jesus a question.

Faith in Jesus Christ is summed up, you see, in this clarion call of the gospel: Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself. To use Mother Teresa's image, "be - live - God's love letter to the world.

One of my preacher friends, Michael Lindvall, tells the story of a church member who asked him to read her autobiography. She handed over a manuscript of that stretched across a span of time from the Great Depression through the Second World War. A few chapters into the book, the author tells the story of a family meal at their home in a small town in Iowa during the

Great Depression, from a time when she was a very young girl. The family, she remembers, had just sat down to the table: Mom and Dad and seven children. There was a knock on the back door – a “homeless person,” we might say today, had come looking for something to eat. She remembers her mother going to the door, returning to the table, picking up her own plate of food, taking it to the back door, and then sitting down again. Everything had been dished up; there was no more. Her father asked one of the older boys to fetch an empty plate out of the cupboard and then the family passed it around the table. Each one shared from their own plate until there was enough to fill the empty one, and the mother of seven could eat.

When he read this account, my friend Michael said what moved him so is this: “What impressed me was of all the dinners this family sat down to nearly three-quarters of a century ago, hundreds and hundreds of dinners, this is the one that was remembered. This dinner alone was remembered because it was such a feast. Oh, not the pot roast or whatever it was literally on the plates. That’s long forgotten. It was the richest of feasts because love was served every which way.” (4)

My friends, in our world today, in so many ways on the brink of destruction, we have heard this word: “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, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” I believe – that in our hearing – Jesus intends for us – for you and for me – to live our lives as God’s love letters to the world. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Mother Teresa story from Joanna Adams, “You Shall Love,” 4<sup>th</sup> Pres, Chicago, 2/9/03.
- 2) Charles Kimball, When Religion Becomes Evil.
- 3) Robin Myers, “Living the Word,” The Christian Century, 10/25/00, p. 1069.
- 4) Michael Lindvall, “How Then Shall We Live?” 4/2/00, First Presbyterian, Ann Arbor.