



"The Heart of It"
Scripture – Mark 12:28-34
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, October 17, 2021

Raise your hand if you remember when the word "groovy" was totally hip? How about Daddy-O? I regret to inform you that you are old! How many remember when we joked that someone had "cooties?"

Some words go out of fashion. Thank goodness! Other words just become tired from overuse. We don't hear the word "cool" as much as we used to hear it. The same goes for "fab." I believe the word "awesome" has now slipped into that category. When everything from touchdown catches to desserts to cars to art, to songs to airpods are AWESOME, the word has lost its clout.

I worry that the same fate has happened to the most important word in the Christian faith. You know the word: Love. We love all of those things that are *awesome* – plus babies, pets, ice cream, reading, hiking, a sunny day, and – if we are so fortunate – our soulmate.

To be honest, our culture is not the only culprit. We are also guilty of overusing the word in church. Love pops up in prayers, hymns, scripture passages, and sermons so that I fear we have drained it of its power.

Concern about this word's overuse is nothing new. When I was in seminary, everyone in the class was given the assignment of writing a sermon. One stipulation! The professor said that nowhere in the sermon could the word "love" appear. If the word "love" showed up, he would reject the sermon.

Why no love? For one reason, it was a cop out. Hmmm, has "cop out" also met its demise? The professor knew that if you feared you were not getting to the essence of biblical justice or forgiveness or gratitude, or if you were fumbling for words to elucidate faith or hope, it was tempting to fall back on love. Who could fault you for talking about love?

Perhaps the chief difficulty with the word love is that it is almost entirely associated with emotion. If you ask someone to describe love, they will likely talk in terms of feelings. Here are the top three definitions of love from one dictionary:

a profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person.

a feeling of warm personal attachment or deep affection.

sexual passion or desire.

We know that love can be a sweet, warm feeling, but ask any parent who has been up half the night sitting with and cleaning up after an ill child and they will tell you that love is also a duty that demands sacrifice and perseverance.

Scour the scriptures and you will not find a single verse in which Jesus says, "I hope you fall in love." Jesus was not opposed to romance and he obviously had warm feelings for his mother, his disciples, and his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. However, Jesus had a much more expansive vision of love than affection.

As I mentioned before reading it, today's passage narrates an episode from the final week in Jesus' life. He has marched into Jerusalem to confront the religious leaders, but they were in no mood to loosen their grip on power, so they were laser-focused on discrediting Jesus. Like attack ads on politicians, their one focus was to take him down.

Three waves of people took a shot at Jesus – first the chief priests, scribes, and elders. When their attempt fell flat, they encouraged the Pharisees and Herodians to go after him. Their attempt blew up in their faces like a trick cigar. Next, the Sadducees took a turn, but Jesus outmaneuvered them as well. I picture this scene like an occasion in which journalists are trying to discredit someone by asking "gotcha" questions, but failing to bag their prey.

Finally, a scribe asked Jesus, not a gotcha question, but a bottom line question. Like the professor who wants to know if her students grasp the core of their subject, the scribe seeks to discover if Jesus understands the foundation of faith.

His question is straightforward. Which is the first commandment?

Jesus replied, "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. This is the greatest and first commandment."

When Jesus responded with these words, most likely every person within earshot muttered the words along with him. Please repeat after me: **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.**

Jesus was quoting Moses who more than 1,000 years earlier told the Hebrew people to memorize these words, to recite them to their children, and to talk about them wherever they were. Love God with your heart, soul and mind.

However, Jesus did not stop when everyone else did. While everyone was nodding and whispering "Yes, he has answered correctly," Jesus kept going. He said, "And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these *two* commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Hold on. The lawyer asked for one commandment. Why did Jesus slip in a second?

Perhaps it was because he was anticipating the scribe's follow-up question. What is the greatest commandment? Love God with your entire being. The follow-up would be: How do you do it?

It is important to note that Jesus did not say, "While I'm naming the greatest commandment, I'll also move on to the second most important." Rather, he said that the second is like the first.

For centuries, Deuteronomy 6, verses 4 and 5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" and Leviticus 19:18 "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" had been separate commands. Jesus wedded the two. They were not to be held apart. If you love God, the way to demonstrate your devotion is by loving others.

And since the two are inseparable, if you do not love others, you cannot claim to love God. The writer of the First Letter of John puts it bluntly. He writes, "Those who say, 'I love God' but hate their brothers and sisters are liars." (1 John 4:20) He also said, "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 John 3:18) As all of us know, words of love are vacuous and meaningless if not validated by action.

The scribe's initial intent was probably like the others who came to see Jesus – to see if he could cause Jesus to stumble. But upon hearing Jesus's reply, he said to Jesus, "You are right, Teacher. Right on target." To which Jesus replied, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

When Jesus talks about love, he is not discussing feelings, he's focused on commitment, responsibility, and loyalty. When we encounter a need, we do our best to meet that need or we stand in solidarity with the person who is hurting.

Opportunities to extend love often catch our attention. When pain is present, it tugs at our heart. When injustice festers, it pricks our conscience. In these moments, we decide whether to look away or to show up. But I suspect there are also many quiet invitations we overlook if we are not awake to the subtleties that surround us. Paying attention is hard work. But the more we coach ourselves to be aware and the more we remind ourselves that we demonstrate our love for God by loving our neighbor, the more it becomes second nature.

I want to be quick to say that none of us ever perfect this. There are some people in this world I cannot bring myself to love. We could see this as Jesus placing the bar too high and setting us up for failure. But I see it as more of an invitation and a challenge. We are to aim our energy at loving as Jesus loved; loving when loving is easy and loving when obstacles arise. Loving when it comes naturally and loving when it demands everything we can muster. We learn to love in our deep bonds with those we cherish, and then we broaden our love to encompass others.

A colleague tells about "Tony and Janel who have been married – as they say – a good long while. Tony has advanced ALS. He is a quadriplegic and exists on a ventilator with a trach. When he wishes to speak, someone must wheel him to a computer that reads the movements of his one good eye as he spells out, letter by letter, what he wants to say."

"Janel has been his voice for several years, but Janel was recently diagnosed with Stage 4 oral cancer. It has robbed her of the ability to speak. [Such a tragedy is difficult to fathom, isn't it? A couple who has been devoted to one another for decades, as they near the end of life, each is rendered incapable of speaking].

"They have had to get creative. Janel uses a white board. Tony uses his computer. Communication between them is mind-numbingly slow and it is fraught with errors. Yet, Janel says it is definitely worth it. Every shared word is a victory. Every misstep is a chance for grace."

“She says when it takes 10 minutes to exchange a simple greeting, you learn to say only what is essential. You also become more understanding and forgiving. Over time, she says, you’d be surprised how much you can still learn about each other. You also learn that the only words worth saying are the words that point toward love.”¹

May we invite this vital truth to sink into our souls so that we too, will draw close to the kingdom of God.

NOTES

1. Jenny McDevitt, “There’s Someone I’d Like You To Meet: James,” August 15, 2021