

Called as Partners in Christ's Service

Mark 12:28-34

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins

A while ago, there was a Frank and Ernest cartoon strip in which the two are standing in front of row after row of shelves of books. On top of one of the shelves is a sign which reads, "Law Library." Frank turns and says to Ernest, "It's frightening when you think that we started out with just Ten Commandments."

It is frightening, isn't it? I wonder how the human race has developed from an ancient society with only 10 commandments, to a society like modern-day America, where in the 50 states and federal government we have an estimated 35 million laws on the books. Some of the laws are very good and are deeply needed. But many need to be repealed. Let me give you a sampling of laws that we probably don't need any more:

In Florida it is illegal for a woman who's single, divorced, or widowed to parachute out of a plane on Sunday afternoon.

In Amarillo, Texas, it is against the law to take a bath on the main street during banking hours.

In Portland, Oregon, it is illegal to wear roller skates in public restrooms.

In Halethorpe, Maryland, a kiss lasting more than a second is an illegal act.

Today in our text from Mark's gospel, we encounter a scribe who quizzes Jesus concerning the law. The scribe is not interested in the obscure teachings of the law. He simply wants to know, of all the law, what is the most important? There are hundreds of commandments, even thousands. Which is the most important?

This is not the only time Jesus is asked such a question. In Matthew, as it is here in Mark, Jesus is asked the question by an expert in the law; it's a test of Jesus' knowledge of God's law. In Luke's gospel, it is a different question that elicits an answer similar to what Jesus gives in today's text: What must I do to inherit eternal life?¹

In each case, the answer that Jesus gives is the same, and it is an answer that is familiar to us all: "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 the second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself."²

Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. "There is no commandment greater than these,"³ says Jesus.

Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments,"⁴ says Jesus.

Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. "Do this," says Jesus, "and you will live."⁵

Of all the commandments, which is the most important? The scribe is not asking a trick question. He simply wants to know, "What is it that is most essential for faithful living as the people of God?"

Isn't that the question that we should ask when considering stewardship? What is it that we must do if we are to live faithfully as the people of God?

¹Luke 10:25

²Mark 12:30-31a

³Mark 12:31b

⁴Matthew 22:40

⁵Luke 10:28b

Jesus lays it out for us as plainly as he can. If you want to know how God would have us live, the answer is simple: 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.

If you want to know what is our purpose as the people of God, both individually and corporately, the answer is simple: 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.

That's why I thought it was so important this year that our stewardship emphasis capture the essence of what our ministry is to be, and that is a collaborative effort by all of us, with the goal of fulfilling those two great commandments through faithful discipleship.

Loving God with our whole being, and loving our neighbor as ourselves – It is something we are to do *together*, as the people of God. We are partners in the gospel. That's how Paul viewed the Philippian church. He said, "I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."⁶ Partnership implies that people are working together to accomplish a common purpose. In the church our stewardship is a partnership in the gospel. The people of this congregation—the staff, the session, each of you—we are all called as partners in Christ's service.

That's why this past Wednesday night we gathered as a church family in the gymnasium and had conversations around the tables about how well we as a church—as partners in the gospel—are fulfilling the two great commandments through our common ministry.

And you spoke. Our elders on session were sitting at your tables, and they listened to the things you had to say. On Thursday, eight members of the stewardship ministry gathered for over two hours to tabulate the scores on the surveys many of you filled out. Then I went through every survey twice to record every one of your comments. Then on Friday and Saturday your session met to reflect on your observations about our ministry.

You need to know that, all told, over 230 man-hours have already been invested in listening to what you have to say about our ministry, and what our priorities should be.

You need to know that your session, and your staff, and your pastor have heard you.

We have heard that this is a church with a friendly, welcoming spirit, and we dare not lose that spirit.

We have heard that this church does well in caring for our members..., and that we must continue to do so.

We have heard that you value a sense of community, and that we need to find ways to build bridges between people who worship at 8:45 and those who worship at 11:00.

We have heard that there are gaps in communication within our congregation, and between congregation, session and staff, and that we need to be more intentional about helping people know what's going on and promoting open, two-way communication.

We have heard that too many people have filled out time and talent surveys, only to receive no invitation to help.

We have heard that not nearly enough adults are participating in our Christian education ministry.

We have heard that evangelism is critical to what we do—from finding ways to reach out and welcome new members, to proclaiming the good news in word and deed in our community, to taking advantage of the opportunities we have to reach the families of the children in our Child Development Center, to using our wonderful music ministry to bring people through the doors of this church.

We have heard that we need to be more focused beyond ourselves--both personally through hands-on service in the community, and through an increased percentage of our budget dedicated to local and foreign mission work.

We have heard that the young people want to do more things with the older people, and vice-versa, so that there can be a stronger inter-generational bond.

⁶Philippians 1:4-5

We have heard, and on the basis of what we have heard and discerned, we have identified several priorities that we are now in the process of refining; those priorities will then be translated into goals and objectives in every ministry area. I hope you will come to the BRIDGES program on Wednesday night. If you can't be here for dinner at 5:15, maybe you can try to join us at 6:00 in the sanctuary, when we can share some of our vision and discernment thus far.

Back at my former church in Midland, Texas, we had a saying whenever people offered suggestions and input for the ministries of the church: To have a vision is to hear a call.

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My point is this. We are moving toward a vision for ministry in which you have collaborated significantly. As we clarify that vision, will you hear the call? And how will you respond?

For you see, this whole notion of being the church is about being called as partners in Christ's service.

Let us pray.

"O Lord, I pray with joy because of the partnership in the gospel that have given to us. Grant that each of us seeks to fulfill, both personally and through the ministry of this church, those two great commandments which are our purpose for being—that we may love you with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and that we may love our neighbors as ourselves. Through Christ our Lord. Amen."