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Abington Presbyterian Church

November 4, 2018

Psalm 24

Mark 12:28-34

THOU SHALT

There are folks who wrongly understand religion only as a bunch of rules that tell us what we are not to do. Thou shalt not do this, thou shalt not do that, so that daily life is restricted by a killjoy mindset that life in general is diminished. Of the 613 commandments in the Hebrew bible, there are plenty that are put in the ‘thou shalt not’ form. In order for there to be the possibility of peaceful community, certain boundaries need to be set. However, when Jesus is asked for his opinion about the first and foremost of the commandments, he chooses two that are in the positive form of ‘thou shalt’. The first is what is called the Shema, the Hebrew word for ‘hear,’ as the command begins, “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 which Jesus decided had to accompany the first is the command from Leviticus 19: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

These commandments are at the center of our faith - loving God, loving neighbor. We have a God who doesn’t just want us to follow divine orders, but who wants us to develop healthy relations with God and with all who are made in God’s image. There is an incredible amount to say about these two commandments, much that would be a response to recent violent events. But today, I invite you to reflect with me about something which has longer-term implications. I have felt like we Presbyterians have done better at loving the Lord our God with all our mind, than we have with our heart, soul, and strength. We have had a rather cerebral approach to scripture and theological questions, but we need to up our game as we are facing a new challenge that broadens what it means to love God and neighbor.

The first lines of our psalm for the day are these: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” If we believe the earth belongs to God and not to political states or factions or to international corporations or to

ourselves with our little pieces of paper we call deeds, then there are some significant ramifications of such beliefs.

A month ago, a report was released by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It is the latest of scientific reports about the serious threat of climate change that is affecting us now and will grow in its impact to the extent that ecosystems across the globe will be irreparably damaged with many more animal and plant extinctions, low-lying areas will be uninhabitable because of flooding, hunger and water issues will grow quickly, mass migration challenges are likely to increase dramatically, the prevalence and strength of major storms will increase, and if that is not enough motivation, global economic output will also decrease markedly. We have just a limited number of years to make large changes in human behavior or our planet will grow significantly less hospitable.¹ Sadly, there has been little American political focus on this very significant threat to the creation of which we are a part.

My father worked for NASA when I was growing up. We followed each space mission very closely in our household. I vividly remember the Apollo 11 mission on which two human beings first walked on the moon. But perhaps even more intense are the memories that come from Apollo 13. This mission was planned to be the third landing on the moon, but there was an explosion of an oxygen tank when the crew was traveling toward its destination. The mission quickly changed from landing on the moon to simply getting the crew back home safely. The gauges which measured the interior atmosphere which was keeping the three astronauts alive were showing alarming messages. Scientists and mathematicians across the country worked feverishly to figure out how to navigate the many problems including those that had to do with temperature and a serious build-up of carbon dioxide within the space module, while they figured out how to use the moon's gravity to sling-shot the spaceship back toward earth. Without everyone working diligently together, the astronauts would not have survived.² I remember the great sense of relief and joy my family and many others felt when a safe splashdown took place.

You and I and seven and a half billion other people are on a spaceship called planet Earth. There are growing carbon dioxide and temperature problems that are leading to many other problems. The gauges that measure our atmosphere are sounding

alarms that many of us, to a great extent, are ignoring. Our human brains evolved over hundreds of thousands of years as a tool for survival which focused primarily on immediate threats. Climate change is a longer-term threat that will require diligent use of our brains if we are going to limit that change and adjust to it. I think scientists and inventors and politicians and educators and religious leaders as well as the broad public and governments will have to work together to make it where spaceship Earth is a sustainable place, because we don't have another planet to which we can relocate.

I mentioned a religious component in addressing this serious, if not existential, challenge. If we are to address this challenge with some success, there will be those laws and rules saying, "Thou shalt not use fossil-fueled energy systems at more than certain levels." There will need to be those who will inform inhabitants of the planet about the threats that will arise out of a passive response to the challenge. But I believe our religious role of being part of the positive solution lies in building the sense that the earth doesn't belong to us, but belongs to God. A successful response will also require motivation that doesn't lie just with fears about points of no return, and flooding and mega-storms and mass migration. Rather, a stronger motivation can come through loving with heart, soul, mind, and strength the One who created this delicately-balanced spaceship, which includes a deep respect for the art piece of which we are a part. Such a love of God must be coupled with a loving drive to do all within our power to mitigate the impact on our neighbors around the world and on future generations who will be even more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than are we.

I started to preach on these texts in a very different way, because of my concerns that this sermon that has focused significantly on climate change might take away from a focus on the beloved members and friends we remember and mourn today on All Saints' Sunday. And yet, part of the reason we give thanks for their lives is because they were dedicated to loving God and neighbor throughout the context of their lives. As our context changes, we have to figure out what love for God and neighbor means for us. Such love certainly calls for a lot more than I have been able to outline today. Let me also add, that I know there are folks who don't believe that climate change is real or is human induced. I would assert the way to love such skeptics is to work for a better climate for them and their children as well,

and not to let such views deter the work that must happen for there to be a chance for the best outcomes.

In recent months, our congregation got accepted into a denominational program that now labels us as an Earth Care Congregation. Motivated by our love for God and neighbor, we will be taking steps to be greener in how this building functions, but we will also be seeking to educate ourselves and others about decisions we can make that allow us to function in a more sustainable way. Jesus showed us a kind of love for God and neighbor that is the richest way to live. It is a love that requires courageous hearts, dedicated souls, focused minds, and durable strength as we live out our love for the great creative artist we call our God. It is a love willing to make sacrifices because of what is just and compassionate. It requires a love for ourselves and our neighbors that looks at the long-term and not just the short-term. The way of Jesus Christ invites us to see where such a love will take us as we discover another reason to refer to him as our Savior. I hope we will come to see love of God and neighbor as the great positive it is - the exact opposite of being a killjoy in our lives. Thou shalt? We shall!

¹ These are just three of the news sources I used for this section of the sermon:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/energy-environment/2018/10/08/world-has-only-years-get-climate-change-under-control-un-scientists-say/?utm_term=.d46761079ef9

https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/2018/08/30/climate-change-could-render-many-earths-ecosystems-unrecognizable/?utm_term=.646181c0e197

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2017/11/13/thousands-of-scientists-issue-bleak-second-notice-to-humanity/?utm_term=.ea5e3f453103

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo_13