

“Holy Curiosity”

Mark 12:28-34

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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This had to be one of the most refreshing conversations Jesus had. It appears this man was not angry and did not approach Jesus with a hostile motive.

By this time in Jesus’ ministry, this was rare. Seems almost everyone in leadership was upset with him because he was openly critical of the way they conducted their business.

Jesus accused many of the religious and secular authorities of abusing their power and mistreating people. He characterized them as selfish, greedy, corrupt and cruel.

Any interaction he had with them was unpleasant to say the least. All they wanted to do was trap him with gotcha questions. But this was not the case with this particular man, at least the way Mark describes their encounter.

He approaches Jesus with a sincere question. “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Mark 12:28b)

Jesus’ reply was probably what this man expected because it was reminiscent of the sacred Hebrew text known as the ‘Shema’, but it had a twist at the end he may not have anticipated.

“The most important one is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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. Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than this.” (Mark 12:29-31)

The man who posed this question quickly affirmed Jesus' response and echoed the words of the prophets when he said that loving God and others was even more important than following religious rituals and designing perfect worship services.

Jesus concluded their time together with a compliment and then added, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." (Mark 12:34)

I wonder how they parted. Did they embrace or smile at one another? I would not have been surprised had they done either.

I enjoy reading the conversations Jesus had with his constituents, especially when they include questions. I find the questions Jesus asked and answered to be insightful and informative. This one certainly is. Let's analyze it for the next few moments.

Why did this individual, who was a teacher of the Law himself, approach Jesus that day? I believe he was impressed with Jesus' courage and intellect.

He had been listening to Jesus and watching how he handled his detractors, and it seems he liked what he saw. Jesus was not intimidated by those who wanted to discredit him and undermine his ministry. Instead, he used these encounters to expose their deficiencies, something no one else had been able to do.

I think there is another reason he approached Jesus that day. He may have been doing some soul-searching of his own. Yes, he was a teacher of the law, but this did not mean he did not have questions of his own or grapple with the mysteries of life and faith as other people did.

Here Jesus was in front of him, and this was his opportunity to ask him a question. He took advantage of it.

"Of all the commandments, which one is the greatest?" he blurted out.

No doubt this question had been batted around by this scribe and his peers on many occasions. They had gone back and forth trying to prioritize the over 600 rules and regulations

that faithful Jews were to honor. This was an opportunity for him to hear a different perspective.

So, he brought his holy curiosity to Jesus.

Why did Jesus answer his question? Jesus was always eager to talk to people about issues of life and faith. He spent his life listening to what people had on their minds and sharing with them what he had learned that might help them. This is what good teachers do.

Why did Jesus answer this scribe's question the way he did? This man asked Jesus to identify the greatest commandment, and Jesus mentioned two, or by some counts, three.

“The most important one is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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. Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than this.”

For Jesus, it was impossible to separate the three. When you love God, you are going to see others and yourself differently. If you love God, you must also love yourself and others.

It's a package deal. Take all three or walk away.

At first this sounds reasonable and fairly easy to do. We pick up the whole package of priorities and head to the door.

Just before we leave the store, though, we read this commandment a little closer and see a word that catches us by surprise, neighbor.

“The second is this. Love your **neighbor** as yourself.”

Then we think of some neighbors, people in our community we work with or go to school with or live around or have in our family that we are not fond of, to put it mildly, and we wonder if we can make exceptions to this particular part of the Great Commandment.

No, we can't.

This commandment does not let us get by with merely trading love with people who love us and are good to us. It forces us to make love personal and inclusive. It demands that we love all our neighbors.

I discovered years ago that it is easier to love some people from a distance than it is close up. I don't have to deal with their unpleasantness and the things about them that irritate me that way.

Long distance loving is not what Jesus had in mind that day.

Notice what Jesus did not say in his answer to this scribe's question. He did not say we are to love the whole world as we love ourselves, or we are to love all people as we love ourselves. He said we are to love our **neighbor** as ourselves.

He connected names and faces and stories with this part of the commandment. He included everyone we know that we really wish we didn't know.

Jesus doesn't let us pick and choose who we are going to love, be good to and treat with respect. At all times and in all places, we are to love the person standing in front of us or living nearby.

I recently read an article about a man and his neighbor. The author was relating how fortunate he was to have such a good neighbor.

His neighbor was always cheerful and helpful. If he needed to borrow a tool, his neighbor was more than willing to loan it.

On the other hand, he had a neighbor that was very noisy at times. He loved to fish and went almost every Saturday.

This created a problem because his neighbor would leave the house before the sun came up, and he would not leave quietly.

He made a lot of noise getting his gear ready, hooking up his boat to the truck and warming the truck before heading out on his weekly fishing expedition. By the time the

neighbor pulled out of the driveway, the sleeping neighbor was wide awake, unable to go back to sleep.

What made this article so interesting and caught my attention was that the good neighbor and the bad neighbor were the same person. Loving his neighbor meant the author of this article had to accept the fact that the man living next to him could be charming and irritating, just as he was.

No one lives with or beside perfect people. No one works with or goes to school with people who have no flaws. No one rides a bus, a plane or a taxi with only perfect individuals.

Everyone we encounter or have relationships with has imperfections. According to Jesus, we must love them anyway, just as we want to be accepted, embraced, included and loved by them.

We are all a combination of the good, the bad and the ugly. The God who loves us with all our faults and flaws requires that we love those around us the same way, unconditionally.

Why? Quite frankly, we have no choice. If your love for someone ends when they disappoint or frustrate you, you will die a miserable, lonely person. Every relationship you have will disintegrate.

Is this really what you want?

You will also undermine what is required to create and sustain healthy communities, be it a marriage, a family unit, a neighborhood, a town, a state, a nation and the world. The only thing that keeps chaos at bay in most homes and neighborhoods is that people who have different interests, opinions, lifestyles, habits and flaws treat one another with dignity, respect and compassion.

They focus upon what they have in common and bring the best out in one another. In spite of their differences, they work together to make hope visible by creating a safe and peaceful place for everyone, which, by the way, is a good description of the kingdom of God.

One of my favorite Old Testament stories centers upon Jacob's marriage to Rachel. (Genesis 29) Jacob fell in love with Rachel and wanted to marry her.

Jacob agreed to work for Rachel's father for seven years for the right to marry her. When that time of service ended and he was granted permission to marry Rachel, Jacob was deceived by Rachel's father and ended up marrying her less desirable sister, Leah. To make matters worse, Jacob had to agree to work seven more years for the right to marry Rachel, which he did.

While there are many lessons to be drawn from this story, I have a favorite. In all reality, the person we marry is both Leah and Rachel. We marry Rachel only to discover that Leah has moved in, too.

Our challenge is to love each other in spite of our differences and these surprises. If we don't, the marriage will not endure.

This is true for every relationship we have.

How is this possible? How can you love people at their best and their worst?

You can't, and neither can I. This is why Jesus' response to the scribe's question that day was carefully crafted.

Look at the order in Jesus' reply. Loving your neighbor is not first but second.

You cannot love your neighbor until you love the God who loves you with all your imperfections. When you love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, you will be empowered to love imperfect people just as God does.

This includes yourself.