

Mark 12:28-34
Relationship Not Ritual
WRCoB 3.10.24

During the time of Jesus

Judaism had evolved into a rather complicated religion.

To be a faithful Jew involved

Navigating through hundreds of rules and regulations

In fact, the Jewish Law contained 365 prohibitions

And 248 positive commands

For a total 613 detailed commandments.

Essentially 365 “don’ts,” and 248 “dos!”

Consequently,

Their faith had become so complex, so convoluted

That it lost its original purpose and meaning.

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Prior to today’s lesson

The religious leaders debated with Jesus.

They challenged him on whether to pay taxes to Caesar

And whether it was proper to divorce.

And after hearing Jesus response

A rather impressed teacher of the law

Came forward to ask another question.

That from the 613 commandments

That all good and pious Jews

Seek to know, understand and follow

Which one was THE MOST IMPORTANT!

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One argument of the time seems to have been
Whether certain commandments
Were more important than others.

Some argued ALL of God's laws were equally important.

All need to be followed without exception.

Others argued that there were major and minor laws.

One was to follow the major laws faithfully.

But the minor ones could be open to interpretation.

So which one, was the most important?

Jesus' response to the teacher's question
Is what we know as the Greatest Commandment

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To those who heard his response
The first scripture was a no-brainer.

Everyone agreed that this verse
Taken from Deuteronomy 4:4-6, the Shema

Was the FIRST and FOREMOST
Principle of the Jewish faith

Conversely, what struck them as rather odd
Is that Jesus quoted a second commandment
To love our neighbor as yourself.

Jesus juxtaposes the second alongside the first
As equal to loving God
Emphasizing its identical importance.

For Jesus says

Mark 12:31 CEB

³¹ The second is this, you will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these.”

The Gospel of Matthew adds

Matthew 22:40 NRSV

⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

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Jesus reduces the complicated Jewish legal system
Down to two essential principles.

Love God. Love neighbor.

He condenses 613 “dos and don’ts” into one law
The law of love.

You might call it the Supreme Law
For every other law falls under it.

The Apostle Paul argues the same thing
In his letter to the Galatians.

Galatians 5:14 NRSV For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

All the lesser laws

Are to be judged in the light of the law of love.

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Let's take for instance, Jesus' view of the Sabbath.

Jesus broke Sabbath laws several times.

First, he allowed his disciples to pick the heads of grain

As they walked through a wheat field

Much to the chagrin of the religious leaders.

Another Sabbath, Jesus entered a synagogue.

The religious leaders carefully watched

To see what Jesus would do

With a man who had a shriveled hand.

Knowing they scrutinized his every move

Jesus asks.

Mark 3:4 (NRSV) "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?"

Which is better

To obey the Sabbath

At the expense of someone's well-being?

Or break Sabbath law to fulfill the law of love?

Jesus didn't hesitate but healed the man.

The religious leaders were outraged

That Jesus so blatantly disregarded Sabbath law.

Jesus associated with sinners
Well, that's no good!

Jesus didn't wash his hands before a meal
Hey, even my mom knew that was wrong!

Jesus talked to a Samaritan woman face-to-face, alone
He can't do that!

Jesus touched a leper
Another broken law.

Jesus allowed a woman to anoint his feet with oil
Wow! Come on, Jesus!

The list goes on.

Jesus made it a point
To purposely challenge their rigid legalism
For the sake of love.

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After Jesus' proclaimed
That loving God and neighbor
Was the greatest commandment

The scribe who asked the question
Wholeheartedly agreed with Jesus!

Showing that even those in opposition
Can be transformed by God's Spirit.

The scribe agreed that loving God and neighbor
Was far more important

Than burnt offerings and sacrifices.

That relationship is far greater than rituals

That love supersedes all of the 613 dos and don'ts

Yes, the church needs rituals

Ordinances the Brethren call them

Baptism, Communion, Anointing, Feet washing

And the Laying on of Hands.

But these aren't the essence of faith.

The core of faith

Is our relationship with God

And with one another.

All made available through Christ Jesus.

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Our faith is best expressed in relationship not ritual.

Not just with the people we go to church with

Or the people we work or play with

Or people we call family.

The really influential expression of our faith

Is how we relate to people

Outside our normal circles.

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This past Tuesday, we had a nice group of people

Serve the meal down at the veteran's shelter.

Two new people showed up to help us!

The crew raises their eyebrows
When I serve myself and sit down
And eat with someone.

I feel that's a part of our ministry.

If they want to talk, great
If not, that's fine too.

The man I talked with Tuesday
Shared his difficulty transitioning
From military to civilian life.

He talked about how America had forgotten the veteran.
About feeling like a second-class citizen.

He said he felt lonely and appreciated a listening ear.

At that table, he felt safe to talk about what was on his heart.

Relationship not ritual

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On Thursday, I sat in on a webcast
Produced by the Barna Group.

In one of the breakout sessions
A facilitator discussed how the church
Does a good job with what he called hand-outs.

Working in or establishing food banks
Serving in homeless shelters

Collecting clothing and back-to-school back-backs.

All good stuff.

But he said, the church's actual engagement
With people outside their normal circles
Is very limited.

He showed a graph
That the majority of people
From impoverished neighborhoods

Saw the needs of people in a completely different way
Than how we might perceive their needs.

The graph showed this.

- 28% of people saw loneliness as the most critical need in their neighborhoods.
- 10% saw racism as the greatest need
- Another 10% saw homelessness as the greatest
- 9% community development
- 9% hunger

He also said that according to another survey
72% of US adults are spiritually open.

The result of these findings is
That our society is ripe for renewal

And instead of hand-outs
We should be finding space for conversation.

The facilitator mentioned something called a “third place”.

From an article in the Today’s Show website.

*The term “third place” originates from a 1989 book, *The Great Good Place*, by sociologist Ray Oldenberg. He characterized third places as locations that facilitate social interaction outside of the people you live or work with and encourage “public relaxation.”*

They are places where you encounter “regulars,” or frequenters of a space, as well as potential new connections. Third places tend to foster light, pleasant conversation and are free from expectations of productivity.

This is where the church needs to be.

The first place, of course, is home.

The second place is the work place or school.

And third place is other than the first two.

My sitting down to eat with a veteran is a third place.

The local dine can be a third place

Sandy Faw’s pickle ball is a third place.

In Europe, it’s the local pub

An intentional place to go and to be

Outside of the normal circles you are in.

So, why do we need a third place?

Third places play an important role in helping us build individual and collective identities outside the home and the workplace. Lee calls them “our social hubs” and says they are “closely tied to social wellbeing,” particularly because we are living in an “increasingly lonely society.”

So, not only do WE need a third place

For our own well-being

Which our community here meets our need

But the church needs to create or join a third place.

If our call is to share the gospel in word and deed

And if our call is to love our neighbor

And if our neighbor is not interested in church

And society's number one problem is loneliness

We need to be in those third places.

I knew a Brethren congregation in Pennsylvania

Who opened a coffee shop away from the church.

It was operated by volunteers from the church

It was meant solely as a place to go for conversation.

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The world needs what the church has in a bad way.

We need to be on the cutting edge
Of our society's transformation
From a place of loneliness
To a place of community.

People need a place where they feel they belong
A safe place
A place where relationships can happen

But the church's Sunday morning is not the answer

Younger generations don't like institutional church.

The church rituals seem foreign and abstract.

Relationship is what the world needs
Not burnt offerings, nor sacrifices or rituals
Not church functions or church surveys

People need a relationship of love
With God, through Jesus Christ

Initiated through our love of neighbor.

It is what Christ calls us to.

Real church takes place out there not here.

Relationship not ritual.