

Proper 26 B Sermon  
Mark 12:28-34  
October 31, 2021

*“Love actually is...”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “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 is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “God is one, and besides God there is no other”; and “to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbour as oneself”,—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.*

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Today is Halloween, obviously. And, as we’ve learned, it’s also Reformation Sunday and, that’s right, Stewardship Sunday. That’s an awful lot for one Sunday! To tie it all together, I’m going to preach a sermon about love. We churchy types love to talk about love. We love to say “love thy neighbor,” usually as a retort to someone else...who usually also happens to disagree with our perspective. It’s like a conditioned response. We love to talk about God’s love and loving everyone and if we all just loved each other everything would be right with the world. The truth is, though, that all sounds a little trite, a little simple, a little tired, doesn’t it? And it makes me wonder if we’re missing

something. After all, if it was really so simple to love others, why haven't we just done it? Let's take another look at our text from Mark's gospel.

Our text finds Jesus in Jerusalem at the Temple. He'd already driven out the money changers and launched an all-out war of wits with the religious elites of his day—the scribes. One after another they hounded him with questions. In yet another attempt to trick Jesus, one of them came forward with a question: “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus knew what was going on, though, and he wasn't going to be made a fool of so easily. He was well aware that choosing any one commandment would be a blunder of epic proportions. Instead, he summarized the entirety of the law in two simple commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Love God. And love others, the way you love yourself—easy to remember. I'll even go so far as to say that we should all know these two by heart. In fact, if this was the only thing we knew about the Bible and about the Christian faith, I think it would be enough. This is Jesus' summary of the whole kit and caboodle. Love God. And love your neighbor *as yourself*. That last part is important too. We can't love others if we don't love ourselves.

These commands of Jesus are not difficult to understand, but they are difficult to live—much more so than we usually give them credit for. Love God. And love our neighbors as ourselves. Seems simple. Just *love*. In practice, though, it's not an easy walk in the park, but it also doesn't seem optional. I can't help but wonder what Jesus meant when he chose to use the word 'love.'

Scholar Douglas Hare tells us that “Jesus is talking about ‘biblical love,’ a love that is marked not by ‘warm feelings’ of gratitude, but by ‘rather stubborn, unwavering commitment.’”<sup>1</sup> Stubborn, unwavering commitment. Rev. Kathryn Matthews explains that the “commitment can

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Matthews. “Commentary on Mark 12:28-34,” Ucc.org, October 25, 2020, [https://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_october\\_25\\_2020](https://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_october_25_2020).

be seen as a setting of the heart, something we choose to do, a way we freely choose to live our lives . . . a ‘setting of the heart,’ a decision to *act* that then affects how we *feel*.” So, the love Jesus was calling for, at least according to these two commentators, is a choice, a commitment, a setting of the heart, a decision to act that then affects how we feel.

Debie Thomas, another excellent commentator, adds one more helpful element to our emerging definition of love. She writes that, “Biblical love is not an emotion we feel, it’s a path we travel. As the children of God, we are called to *walk* in love. Think aerobic activity, not Hallmark sentiment.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, it’s hard work. The kind of love Jesus was talking about here when he told the scribe to love God and love neighbor as self is a choice, a commitment, a decision to act that then affects how we feel, and it’s hard work.

A few minutes ago, Linda shared another reading from scripture that, I think, serves as an excellent case-in-point for this kind of love. We heard about three women: Orpah, Ruth, and their mother-in-law Naomi. All three women had become widows. Naomi had lost her husband and both of her sons. And she was living in a strange land far from her home. Naomi, a word that means pleasant, changed her name to Mora, which means bitter and she was surely bitter.

She decided to return to her homeland and urged her daughters-in-law to do the same. Orpah relented, but Ruth, she pledged her love for Naomi in some of the most striking words in all scripture—words often selected for reading at weddings.

*Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.*

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<sup>2</sup> Debie Thomas. “Walk in Love,” Journeywithjesus.net, October 24, 2021, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>.

*May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!*

Ruth's love for the bitter Naomi was far, far from cheap Hallmark sentimentality. It was stubborn love. It was a life-choice. It was a decision to act, to walk in love no matter the consequences. And, without question, it would be hard work. I think that's exactly what Jesus was talking about.

As Christians, we commit to the way of Jesus. This is the way of freely-chosen, deeply committed, hard love. It's the way of deciding how we're going to act toward others before we consider how it will make us feel. It's the way of bringing love to life in our world through our actions, motivated by our choices, driven by our commitments, that leads to real change and not just petty sentimentality. That is love. And that is our charge. It is not to be taken up lightly, but love actually is exactly what our world needs.

May we choose love. Amen.