



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"All of Me" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

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Mark 12:28-34 - *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked Him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"* ²⁹ *"The most important one," answered Jesus, is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'* ³¹ *The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* *There is no commandment greater than these.*" ³² *"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but Him. ³³ To love Him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."* ³⁴ *When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask Him any more questions.*

Today we continue in our sermon series from the gospel of Mark called Hope Restored. By our reading from scripture today you can already guess that a

great deal of how Hope is restored in our world is deeply connected to the issue of love.

When it comes to issues like love it is surprisingly difficult to preach on and that's because we can easily descend into useless bumper sticker clichés, inane sentimentality, or unrealistic idealism, but as you just read love is anything but inane and idealistic. It is the central purpose of human existence. The greatest act that will do the greatest good to the greatest amount of people in a very broken world - and it will require every bit of our lives to love God and others well. It will require all of me.

In our setting today Jesus is teaching in the Temple during Passover Week. It's just a few days before He will be crucified. During this holy week the Jewish religious leaders are trying to trap Jesus into saying something that will lead to His demise. This is why we read in verse 28 that a teacher of the law heard 'them' debating with Jesus. The 'them' are the temple priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, and other religious leaders debating with Jesus.

Upon hearing Jesus' impressive answers to the conniving

religious leaders the scribe is so impressed that he genuinely wants to hear Jesus' opinion about a question that was commonly debated among Rabbis in Jesus' day. Of all the commandments (613 of them), which one is the greatest? In other words, what is the central aim of what life is all about with God?

Interestingly Jesus doesn't just say one command but ties two commands together love God and love your neighbor. For Jesus these become like two sides of the same coin, they are completely interwoven. This two-sided coin has become known throughout the centuries as The Great Commandment.

Let's look at the first side of the coin. As we read in verses 29-30 Jesus says the most important commandment is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." When one reads this the first thing that seems to jump out of these verses is the repetitive use of 'all.' So the question becomes, why is 'all' emphasized so strongly?

How many of you have heard of the singer John Legend? This guy is a great singer and songwriter. One of his big hits, which he wrote for his wife is called All of Me.

The congregation listened to the chorus of All of Me from 1:02-1:46: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mk7-GRWq7wA>

This song was gigantically successful on YouTube - 1.4 billion hits. Part of the reason of its massive success was the nice melody, but I think the biggest part of its success was the lyrics. It's not only poetic, but it gets at what makes love work. The "secret ingredient," so to speak, is found (again) in that word "all." Like Jesus' great commandment the word "all" for John Legend holds a pretty important place in his relationship with his wife. Why is that? Well think of it like this. What if he sang, "Most of me more or less loves all of you?" Would it have the same heart soaring impact? Why not? What does that little notion of that little word "all" do to the impact of the entire song?

It's like when I do weddings. Imagine if I said that to couples when I married them: "Bill do you pretty much take Susan to be your wife? Will you more or less love her so long as you both shall live?" What's wrong with that kind of wedding vow? Would you want me to say that at your wedding? Why not? Because we all know no significant relationship can thrive and flourish if the folks in that relationship are not fully

committed and it doesn't only have to do with romantic relationships. We just heard from Pete Jones (SWAT team member) how he had to approach a house with a hostile gunman. Imagine if as he was about to go ahead his teammates told him, "Don't worry Pete. We are pretty much behind you." Does that work? No way!

My point is, any important, loving, intimate relationship requires full devotion in order for it to be healthy, vibrant, joyful and long lasting. Anything less than all of me is damaging and hurtful and corrosive to the relationship and that's why I think God puts that love commandment in those terms. Not just to lay a big burden on you, but so that there can be real, long lasting vibrancy and joy in our relationship with Him and others.

Now before I move on I want to be really clear about something. I'm not saying get yourself really psyched up to be devoted or force yourself to stay devoted by our own grit and determination. Good luck with that. It will never happen. You are saved and loved by grace and you remain on the Christian path by grace. The force of my sheer will will never muster enough spiritual power to love God or neighbor as God intended. We all need God's grace and power to pull this off. As it says in 1 John 4.19: "*We love because He first loved us.*" In other words His love set off a chain reaction in us and gave us the foundation upon which we can stand and find the strength and abilities to love others.

This leads me to the second side of the Great Commandment Coin: That is, to love our neighbor. First of all, have you ever thought about why Jesus brings this into the central command? Why not add some other commandment like honor you mother and father or don't lie or steal, etc. Those are good laws, why not use them?

First consider this, we have to remember that Jesus was more than just a great religious figure. He is a psychological, relational, and spiritual genius. What He does in us and forges in us is done because this is the smartest thing to bring about in our lives.

Jesus doesn't just give His directives in a religious vacuum. He doesn't make arbitrary declarations ('Oh, this sounds like a good one. Let's use that.'). He knows the human condition. He created the human condition. He knows what it takes socially, emotionally, relationally, psychologically to thrive and live into the highest levels of humanity. And He also knows what can shatter the human condition into a million pieces.

Developments in the sciences have really helped us understand why Jesus may have particularly added love your neighbor to be part of this central commandant.

The short of it is this: We are hardwired biologically and neurologically by God to function best and to flourish and thrive in loving relationships. If we don't live according to how we are hardwired we will go haywire.

Let me show you what I mean. Scientists have discovered how experiencing loving attentiveness early on in life is crucial to our long term sense of worth, confidence, emotional stability, and the way of relating to others for the rest of our lives.

The video I'm about to show you discusses "The Still Face Experiment." In this experiment you will see a mother and her infant joyfully interacting with each other, and then for a brief period of time the mom will keep her face still and show no emotional engagement with her child. It's as if she is cutting off love to her child.

As you watch this let God speak to you about its implications for our souls. Let's see what happens. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0&t=25s>)

Notice how when the mother was not emotionally responsive or lovingly engaged with the baby the child goes a little haywire. Why? Because she is hardwired neurologically to experience loving, responsive, emotional engagement with her caregiver and nurturer. From the cradle to the grave this is one of our most basic human needs.

Now imagine if that 'still-face, no love' situation was a chronic situation for someone growing up. What might that be like? Well, it could happen that their emotional world would not know psychological rest. It would not know trust, safety, security, intimacy, or the courage to explore their world, etc.

In other words, our souls would not know well the essential qualities and characteristics that are crucial to a healthy and vibrant life. Do you know what can arise when we experience chronically what that baby experienced for that short time? Things arise in our lives like Perfectionism, Performance issues, People-Pleasing, deep seeded Resentment, Anger, and of course, Shame. Shame is that inner conviction that we are defective, deficient, reject-able, and unlovable. That's what the human brain will feel when it experiences too much of that 'still face' so to speak.

The good news is this kind of trauma doesn't have to cause permanent damage in people. Notice that when the mother is reengaged again the child gets better. My point is, when we Christians consistently love others and emotionally engage with people who may not be loved very well in their life we too can help heal the soulful and emotional brokenness that happens to so many people.

I don't know if you ever read this, but the Surgeon General of the United States from 2014 to 2017, a doctor named Dr. Vivek Murthy said this: *"When I was practicing medicine up in Boston, people would often ask me 'what's the most common illness you see'... And I would tell them it wasn't heart disease ... [or] cancer. But it was loneliness and isolation."*

That may sound odd that loneliness can create physical illness, but its true. Studies have

shown that social isolation is as significant to mortality as smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, and lack of physical exercise.

I bring in all this science because I truly believe that beneath Christ's directives there are very real biological and sociological and psychological realities that He considers.

Again, He is not arbitrary with His commands. Reality is without loving relationships of the nature Jesus desires people suffer. And they will suffer emotionally, soulfully, relationally, and even physically. We are inherently inadequate to live life to the full by ourselves. We need others in our journey to become what God intended.

Now perhaps I should lay out some sort of definition for the word "Love." The full meaning of this word could fill this room floor to ceiling with various descriptions. But at the risk of sounding a little reductionistic let me give you just a small piece of what it may entail.

First of all, let me say that to love is not just to feel strong emotional feelings toward others - although it may very well include that, but it doesn't have to. At the very least: Love is an unconditional value and regard for someone that motivates and shapes our behavior to help that person become what God desires (I owe a great deal to theologian, Scott McKnight for that definition).

Notice that love is not just about feeling something toward someone, but to have such a divine regard and value someone that prompts us to action on their behalf (regardless of their response, I might add) so they can experience God's best for their lives.

In terms of how we live this out, well there are a zillion ways to do that. But my point is this, if we don't begin our "how to" with doing all we can to see, value, and regard others as God does then we will likely get stuck focusing in on their sins (and there will be a bunch of them) and miss the mark of loving our neighbor.

I am reminded by the words of Christian writer and philosopher Dallas Willard when he said: "Our relations to others cannot be right unless we see those others in their relation to God. Even in their ruined condition a human being is regarded by God as something immensely worth saving. Sin never makes us worthless, only lost."

Notice that to love your neighbor well starts with seeing them in their relation, not to you, but to God. Not primarily to see others in relation to their political stances or ideologies, or their nationality or ethnicity or gender or religion etc. It's about seeing people in their relation to God. In other words, His value of them. And that relation to God always imparts to any person an "immense worth," as Willard put it.

Look, here's reality: People are not always good. In fact, sometimes they're pretty lousy, but they are always sacred and that little fact changes everything.

Let me be honest. People who come through our church doors, or cross our paths in our everyday world are often mixed up, muddled up, and maybe more than a bit sinful. But never once has anyone walked through our doors or walked into your business or sat next to you in your classroom that was not utterly sacred. Not they have never sinned or even done evil, but that they are in every moment sacred to God and that's our starting point in how to loving our neighbor.

If we forget this it is so easy to slip into some sort of "Tinder" version of loving our neighbor. Do you know what Tinder is? I use that metaphor because in a way we Christians can do a little "Tinder" when it comes to our neighbor; swiping left those folks, who for whatever personal reason, we take little interest in loving, praying for, or starting a conversation with, etc.

You may not think this is a big deal, but let me ask you this: What would you think if I as a pastor started to do that with people who came through our doors? What if I "swiped left," as it were, for most folks and I "swiped right" only on some folks who were easier for me to love? What does my ministry become at that point? What does church become? Or what if I stood by the door and I did a little, "Yes you, maybe you. You?

Oh heck no!" Does that sound even close to okay for a pastor?

If I can be honest here for a second, everyone knows that people on this side of the pulpit can't pick and choose whom to love or minister. We can't "swipe left" on people. My question is, how about those folks on the other side of the pulpit? Do different rules apply? Do folks on that side of the pulpit get to "swipe left" if they feel like it? If so, why would we believe that?

I know this is a bit of a hard point I'm making, but I bring this up because as much as we who are on this side of the pulpit try what we can to bring about God's best for people in the world, it will largely be the people on that side of the pulpit that end up changing our world for God as He intended.

Let me share with you an example of a guy in our community who is not a pastor, but who loves others like they way Jesus intended and is changing lives in the process.

There is a man in our church by the name of Shane Millard, who owns and operates a medical clinic, Braun Urgent Care, in Kailua. He has about 13 staff.

When I talk to him about how he goes about his work as a man of God he has this awesome a holistic-love approach to people. If patients are facing chronic disease or a life ending illness he knows they are internally dealing with "Oh my goodness. How am I going to live with this?"

So he will intentionally bring up the idea that this illness is not just physical. Shane will say to them: "Medically we are about as far as we can go. I can see how things are affecting you emotionally and spiritually. So how can we lift your quality of life emotionally, relationally, and soulfully in this difficult season for you?"

Isn't that such a loving approach to people? Don't you think people are feeling loved and deeply cared for at that point because he says those things? If he notices they wear a cross he'll ask about their faith back-ground and the support they may get through that.

If they don't have support or they don't believe in God he asks this great question: "So where will you find hope then in the midst of this illness? Where will you find joy for your future now that this is with you?" Some respond with, "That's a great question and I don't even know!" Do you see how he lovingly gets people to think of greater things for their lives?

He says, "I try to speak spiritual wisdom without coming across as preaching to them. They don't come to me for preaching, but they come to me to feel better so I talk about what "better" includes." Then sometimes he says "I'm not asking you to believe my faith... but it may be something you may want to consider for your life at this point."

Other times God leads Shane to ask the patient to pray with them. He doesn't launch into a

15 minute prayer, he says he offers just a short prayer.

Admittedly, he says some just blow it off, but others don't. In fact, some patients do report getting baptized and going to church etc. And he says he has these kinds of conversations with patients several times a week! That is way more than I do and I'm a pastor!

Let me be clear, these are not evangelism tricks he uses to weasel his way into a spiritual conversation. He is simply attentive to the person's Divine value, Christian, or not, and he considers their emotional state, their psychological state, their relational state, and of course where they put their spiritual hope. In other words, he really tries to bring about God's best in each area of their lives.

Sounds great, doesn't it? But wait there's more! He also tries considering the whole life of his employees. He told me: "I want them to keep their spiritual lives in order, their family lives in order, their personal lives in order, and then their working life in order." He said he actually tells his staff, "I want to be fourth on your list not first." How many bosses even say that?! In fact, he is very intentional about altering work schedules so they can live into a better life that God desires for them. Okay, so who now wants to work for Shane?

Can you imagine if Christians in every workspace operated like that toward clients and co-workers? Do you think we would see more of God's kingdom

come, His will done, on that side of the pulpit as it is in heaven?

Okay so let's try to wrap this up with one last point. Remember how the scribe responds to Jesus' answer? In verse 33 the scribe said that loving God with everything we are...and loving our neighbors "...is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." Given the setting of that comment this really is a mind-blowing statement.

Remember that Jesus is at the Temple during one of holiest weeks of the Jewish calendar. It is a time where the temple is buzzing with religious rituals and making animal sacrifices.

In fact, think of all the sights, sounds, smells, and activities going on as this man says this: The sight, sounds and smells of animals sacrificed and burning on an altar. The smell of incense and the sounds of prayers floating through the air.

In other words the sights, smells, and sounds of religion in full bloom. But this guy, a guy who knew nearly every word of every command of God, says to Jesus despite all these sights, sounds, smells, and activities of religion that nothing is greater than to love God and love our neighbor.

Even he realizes that following God is not about rituals or religion, it's about relationship. That is not to say those other things have no importance only that they are truly secondary to love.

In other words, you can sacrifice sheep till your eye deep in animal skins or you can attend church activities till you die of exhaustion, but it will all be worthless if we don't get the love of God and neighbor at the center of who we are and what we do as the people of God.

So what is God saying to you this morning? If you are in a place in life where you need the Hope of Jesus in your life I invite you to give yourself to Him heart, soul, mind, and strength. If you are already a follower of Jesus, how is the "all" in your following? Can it use a little recalibration? Moreover what one thing can you think of doing to shed a little more love to your co-worker, your friends, roommates, extended family, etc. as Shane does with his?

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org
The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting:
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