When Newness Comes: A New Understanding

Mark 12: 28-34

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Being first is an important value in western culture; the competition to be “number one” is all around us! It starts when we are kids: we want to be the first in line at school, the first one to get the new toy or phone or video game. But this lust for being number one isn’t something we outgrow. As adults we want to get to the “top of our game”, to earn the most, to gain the most recognition, whether that’s at our jobs, as the neighbor with the best garden or lawn, the most worthy volunteer or as a member of the fastest growing church. We want to be first, the best. No wonder some of us are at the same time, enthralled and repulsed by the ever changing “front runner status” of this political season. Everyone wants to know who’s first!

Interestingly enough, it’s this *same* desire, the desire to know who or what is “the best” that is expressed by one of the scribes who came to see Jesus in the biblical text we read today. Mark has been recording the interactions between Jesus and the religious leaders, during what was actually the last week of Jesus’ life. Back in chapter 11, the chief priests and scribes question Jesus about his authority. In chapter 12 it’s the Herodians and Pharisees who come to “trap him.” To their inquiry, the Sadducees add their own interrogation. Until we finally get to a single scribe, who upon hearing wrangling worthy of a presidential debate, asks Jesus this question, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

Seems like a straightforward question with a straightforward response. Anyone who knew the commandments would know what order they come in. It appears to be a no brainer to us. But being “first” meant something different in Jesus’ day. Being first wasn’t about being the best, about having advantage over someone else; it wasn’t about strength or power or intellect or money. When he asks the question, “which commandment is the first of all?’ the scribe is *really* asking the question, “What is foundational?” What is the basis for all belief?” Now that’s a much different question!

The scribe wasn’t asking Jesus to pick out his favorite, to name the most popular, to indicate the one that would get the most votes. The scribe was asking, “What’s at the heart of our faith?” “On what belief, knowledge, or truth, do all other beliefs stand?” It’s a provocative question. On what belief, on what principle, on what truth does your faith stand? What is the beginning place for you? What do you know, believe, understand deep in your heart that is the bedrock for all other things you know about God, about yourself, about the world?

I remember driving to Florida once with an Australian friend of mine who loved to while away the time engaging in philosophical wondering. As we drove south on 95 she peppered me with questions, like “How would you describe God in three words?” “What is your core belief?” “What one verse from scripture captures the essence of the Divine?” It was an interesting trip! I can tell you that as the driver I was more than once tempted to pull over and leave her on the roadside! Turn on some music, for heaven’s sake! But it was also an enlightening exercise to examine our faith; she wasn’t challenging me. She was pushing to see what was foundational for my beliefs and to reflect on her own as well.

“Which commandment is the first of all?” Which is foundational? Which is the thing on which every other affirmation is made? Jesus answers, “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.’” This is where faith begins: belief in, and devotion to, one God. But Jesus doesn’t stop there: “The second is this,” he says, “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Love God; love your neighbor. It’s that simple and it’s that difficult. This is the foundation of faith, Jesus says. This is what everything else is built on. This is why, as the Pope recently insisted, people of faith build bridges, not walls. The word Mark uses for “love” is not the love of romance or even the love of friendship. But it is the kind of love that is self-giving, the kind of love that does not need or look for reciprocity; it is love that by definition, puts others first. Love God, love neighbor. This is foundational; everything else builds on this.

And then notice what happens next in the text. After all the challenges, all the arguing, all the one ups-man-ship between the religious leaders and Jesus, this lone scribe says, “You are **right**, Teacher….this is **much more important** than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” The scribe agrees!! He agrees with Jesus! And not only does he agree, he allows that this one teaching, this “Love God, love neighbor” is more important that the entire system of paybacks and indulgences and powers that prevented people from knowing, loving and serving God in the first place. The entire elaborate system of offerings and sacrifices, from which the scribe himself has drawn his living, is nothing compared to this. “Love God, love your neighbor.”

A new understanding. Not contentious, not defensive, not threatening, but open and willing to embrace what is true. The question is not asked to trick Jesus, but to understand him. The scribe’s response is made not to shield himself, but to embrace what is new. And Jesus honors this one’s willingness to break from the pack, to give himself over to this foundational truth: “You are not far from the kingdom of God,” Jesus tells him. Imagine that! Imagine that.

Imagine what a new understanding of “being first” might have on our society! What if instead of being the “top of the heap” we sought to be the **foundation** on which everything else was built. What might newness look like then? What would you say, what would we say as First Baptist Church in response to “what’s first?” Would we quote the Hebrew Bible? Would we remember the simplistically meaningful song we sang we children, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so?” If we had only the space on our sign outside to tell the world what we think is the most important, foundational truth about our faith, what would we write? Imagine if God became the foundation of every life lived in Pottstown, in the world, today!

Imagine what a new understanding of “love God, love your neighbor” might have in our lives today! What if instead of beating our opponent we sought ways to give ourselves to them in every way; what if *that* became the foundation on which relationships are built? What would it look like for us to claim loving our neighbor as the basis for every decision we make, for every vote we take, for every choice we choose? I was recently in a church meeting to vote on leasing the church tower to a company for a cellular tower. As we talked about rental income and all the things we could do with the money gained, a young woman named Dee stood up and asked, “What impact will it have on our neighbors?” We were looking out for ourselves; Dee was focused on something much more foundational than that!

As we come to the table this morning, know that this faith of ours is build on these things: loving God, and loving others. It’s that’s simple and that difficult. It’s simple because God shows us what love looks like; it’s difficult because we are easily distracted and influenced, and frankly find it hard to put others’ interests before our own. But this is the challenge for us; this is God’s call to us. As we move deeper into this Lenten season, may we seek to understand might it would mean return to the foundation of our faith: Love God, love neighbor. And we will be open to a new understanding, when newness comes.