



Sunday, Mar. 22, 2020  
Sermon Series: Hard Questions On the Way

Is Love Actually All We Need?  
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

**Mark 12:28-44** NRSV

<sup>28</sup>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?" <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup>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.' <sup>31</sup>The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." <sup>32</sup>Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other;' <sup>33</sup>and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices." <sup>34</sup>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.

<sup>35</sup>While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? <sup>36</sup>David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet." ' <sup>37</sup>David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?" And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

<sup>38</sup>As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, <sup>39</sup>and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup>They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

<sup>41</sup>He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup>Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup>For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

I would like to talk about literally anything else today than what is happening in our world right now. If you're like me, you have already had more than your fill of COVID-19 updates. And jokes about toilet paper hoarding. And bad news about the economy. Wouldn't you rather be thinking about spring, and Lent, and March



Madness? Anything familiar and certain and expected. But we don't have the luxury of focusing on those things right now. And probably won't for awhile.

Which is why at least today's question from our Hard Questions on the Way series, based on this text from Mark 12, feels like a question we can answer with confidence: Is Love Actually All We Need?

This doesn't seem like a hard question. The answer feels obvious. It's baked into our cultural consciousness. Of course love is all we need. It's the foundation of all that is good. It makes the world go 'round. It is the greatest of God's gifts. All we need is love.

But tell that to the woman in Seattle whose mother in Illinois died this past week, without her daughter at her bedside because travel has been restricted.

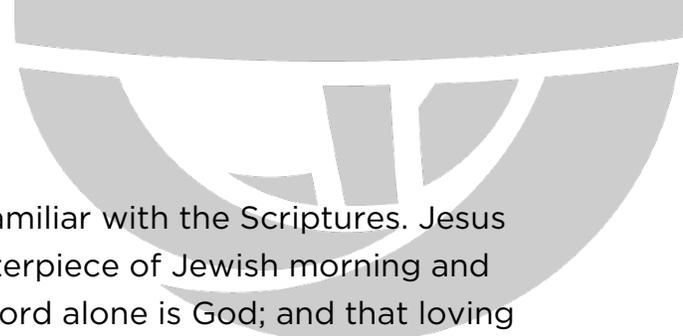
Tell that to the frazzled parent trying to work from home, teach their children, and maintain some semblance of normalcy while their household is in close quarters.

Tell that to the man whose anxiety is eating him alive as story after story about what's happening in Italy, Iran, and Los Angeles fill his newsfeed.

Yes, we need love, but we need more, too. We need presence. Physical contact. Patience. Peace. We need a timeline, a reassurance that these things we're doing to flatten the curve are working. We need a sense of when life will just get back to normal. We need warmer weather so we can get outside and we need tiny buds to assure us that spring's renewal is just around the corner. There is so much that we need these days, so much that is just beyond our reach.

Which is why I am thankful for the scribe. This unnamed man approaches Jesus not to trap or to trick, but with a question that we can take at face value in these uncertain times. Jesus, the scribe says, what really matters? Oh, that's not what he asks, of course. He asks Jesus to sift through the hundreds of laws and commandments that guide the Jewish tradition and to name which one is at the top of the priority list. But Jesus sees through to the heart of the question: How do we focus on what is most important?





The answer Jesus gives would satisfy anyone familiar with the Scriptures. Jesus first chooses a verse from the Shema – the centerpiece of Jewish morning and evening prayer. That passage affirms that the Lord alone is God; and that loving God with everything we have, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, is what we are made to do. And Jesus pairs it with a verse from Leviticus, you should love your neighbor as yourself.

But though those answers are satisfying, they can feel more aspirational than actual. After all, the reason Jews recite the Shema every day, morning and night, is because it is all too easy to forget to place God first. And the call to love your neighbor from Leviticus comes as the counter to humanity's natural tendency to seek revenge when wronged. In situations of conflict, the text reads, we need to resist the urge to be right, to win.

When Jesus ties these two verses together, he is underscoring that anything that gets in the way of love has got to go. For Jesus, it was a system that oppressed the lowest and the outcast, a society that valued hierarchy and tradition over people. He makes it clear that we cannot love God without loving our neighbor.

So what is getting in the way right now for you? What is keeping you from loving God and loving others?

It might be fear.

It might be worry.

It might be denial.

It might be exhaustion.

All of these things are very real. It's ok to acknowledge them. But don't get stuck there. Do whatever it is that keeps you from pitching your tent in that place that drains your life away. Take a walk. Take a breath. Take a nap. In this time of spatial distancing I find myself putting my hand on my heart a lot – to feel it beating beneath my skin, to remember that life is a gift, to pace myself. Whatever it is for you that gives life and helps you maintain perspective, please do it – for your sake, and for the sake of those you love.



Friends, as we live in this unsettling time, we need each other now more than ever. In the days and weeks to come, we will have plenty of opportunities to put



love into action. And as you do, remember Jesus' parting words to the scribe: "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

What does he mean by that? The kingdom of God feels pretty far away at this moment.

Remember where this story is headed. Jesus is on the way to the cross. He is prepared to suffer and die out of selfless love for the whole world. That's the act that brings the kingdom here, right here, right everywhere on this planet where people are giving up their own needs for the needs of others.

It can seem a whole lot easier to love in times of crisis. We're all in this together, after all. But as this epidemic turns from days to weeks, as businesses close and the tempers flare and the novelty wears off we are going to have to dig as deep as we ever have to summon the grace and mercy it will take to keep showing love.

And so my prayer for you on this COVID-19 journey is a simple word: *patience*. This will be a long haul. We don't have answers. We won't have answers. But we do have the one thing that brings us close to the kingdom of God: the unending love of the one who shows us how to love God, and love our neighbor, and love ourselves. We have Jesus' promise that the one who formed us is holding us. In fear, in sickness, in uncertainty, in sorrow, in life, and in death. Always. Amen.

