

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
March 15 & 16, 2014
John Crosby
Every Day: The Relational Gospel
Mark 12:28-34

Let's do two things to prepare to hear God say something to us. The first thing is, let's get God's Word in front of us. Would you please take out your Bibles and turn to Mark, chapter 12? And just to help you remember what we talked about last week and what we're talking about this week, we have put a card in each of the pews for you. If you're at the end of the pew, would you take a card and pass the rest down? Everybody take one.

Last year Scot McKnight came here and preached. He asked, "What's the best picture of the Christian life in action?" If you wanted to see it at work, what would be the most accurate outworking of faith? Some suggested that it would be social justice. That those who follow Jesus care, like Mother Teresa cares, for the ones nobody else cares about. Others said the most faithful people are the ones who listen hard for the word of God, the nuns and the monks who use spiritual disciplines and silence to hear God's voice. Still others felt—and there are many Presbyterians who feel this way—that God wants us to have our minds come alive in order to see God alive in the world and in our culture, that great theology like John Calvin's would mark the believer. Still others said, "No, it's none of those, the best way that you show that you're connected to Christ is to be connected to Christ. When we come and are fed by the Eucharist, the Body of Christ, we live." Scot pointed out that if you take any one of those, it becomes not only imbalanced, but in the end, it just feels like religion, what you've got to do to get God on your side.

Now we're ready for Mark 12.

28 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?"

What's the most important thing for the Christian life? And for the very first time, I think, Jesus describes what is the most important thing in life, in a Snow White-type interaction. "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" "Jesus, what's the most important thing of all?" How about this? Let's do this a little different here. Let's do this together and instead of looking down at your Bible, why don't I ask you to do what the kids just taught you. If I were to say, "*Shema!*" what would I be saying? *Shema* is,

29 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

And what is the most important Commandment?

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." [Mark 12:29-31]

Every morning and every night the Jews would recite the *Shema*, Deuteronomy, chapter 6. When they woke up, throughout the day when they prayed, and at night by their bedside. As they walked into their homes, they would touch the frame and remember to pray.

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. **5** Love the LORD [Deuteronomy 6:4-5]

So when Jesus combines the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6 and

18 love your neighbor as yourself. [Leviticus 19:18]

He is describing what a life of faith really looks like. Jesus' vision of the Christian life is not just marked by justice. It's not just marked by holiness or by the Eucharist or by spiritual disciplines. And it certainly is not that when you see a theological brain walking by, you go, "Oh, that's what Jesus people look like. It is marked by loving God and loving others. It sounds so good and after 2,000 years of hearing it, it sounds very Jesus-y. What a shame we don't do it! Because really, we struggle at it, don't we? Love God. It's hard to tell if we're loving God, but as the choir sang, if we're not loving our neighbor, how are we loving God? I think most of us spend most of the time *not* in the house of God's love. Henri Nouwen says most of us live in the house of fear and not in the house of God's love. How about you? Is your life marked by love or by fear? Nouwen speaks for me:

We are a fearful people. The more people I come to know and the more I come to know people, the more I am overwhelmed by the negative power of fear.

Fear saps all the good stuff.

It often seems that fear has invaded every part of our being to such a degree that we no longer know what a life without fear would feel like.

We live in the house of fear: the fear of sickness, the fear of a relationship that breaks up, the fear of the job that goes sour, the fear of a face that doesn't work, the fear of not knowing the right answers, the fear of losing your friends. We are fear filled people and Nouwen finishes,

But love is stronger than fear though it often does not feel that way.

Those who love God and love others are moving from the house of fear into the house of love. Now I've got to tell you, I think most times it's not a sweaty, gut-wrenching, joy-robbing fear but I think most of us, most normal people, live in the "every-person-look-out-for-themselves" real life world, and there is always a little fear that this is going to go bad. The idea that we can live in the house of love feels like, "Oh, that would be so nice. Oh, that feels like Pollyanna." But Jesus says, "What's the most important thing? You want to know the most important thing? Love God. Live in the house of God's love. Learn to love others. Live in love."

So if that is the most important thing and if you could live more like that today, how could you live in the house of love? What does it look like to love somebody? I think the *Shema* gives us a good starting place because if you love somebody, you spend time with them, right? You can't have a relationship unless you're spending time together. That's why two, three, four, five times a day, the Jews would turn to their God and say, "God, we love you." We are to spend time with God, not on our hands and knees in prayer, although that's an important part of it, we're supposed to be living life in a way that reminds us of God's presence.

There was a monk named Brother Lawrence, not the brightest bulb on the string, but people noticed that wherever Brother Lawrence was, he seemed not only at peace, but he seemed to be in contact with God. They said, "How do you do this?" And he goes, "I practice the presence of God. I find that is actually easier for me to do when I'm washing the dishes than when I'm sitting in chapel. When I'm sitting at my desk, I think of God more often than when I'm singing hymns. I practice the presence of God and I hear God say, 'I love you' and I say 'I love you, too.'" That's what Henri Nouwen calls moving into the house of love. Being reminded that at the roots of our existence is not the fear of death, it's the love of a God who will not let us go. How do you love somebody? You spend time with them.

Then I think you have to fix what's broken because relationships are hard whether it's my relationship with God, which is broken, or my relationships with other people, which are never ever perfect. You never learn to love unless you fix what is broken. I have three younger brothers, two of whom are actually out of jail right now. They're good guys! One of them lives over in St. Paul. His daughter is getting married next September. That's a wonderful thing. We were talking and one of the brothers said, "Well, let's have our annual golf tournament that same week, you know how hard it is to get everybody together." I said *okay* and then I turned to Joe, that's his name, and I said, "Is that okay?" And he said, "I don't know nothing. Betsy's in charge. You've got to ask Betsy." So since I am the champion (did I tell you I won the Crosby last year, thank you very much), since I am the champion, I wrote Betsy a note and said, "Bets, we are thinking about doing the Crosby that week. Is that a good idea or a bad idea?" And she goes, "I think it's a good idea. You guys will get out of my hair."

So, I sent out the dates and then I get an email from Joe. Do you ever feel like when you are talking about anything relational, emails are from the devil? He says, "Hey," (I can't even use the next word) "Hey, dope, what did you think Betsy was going to say? Betsy's never said *no* to anything in her whole life! Betsy is going crazy that week. Do you really think that's the best week for us to invade and play golf?" And I'm like, "Well, I asked permission. I'm trying to do the right thing." I sent him back an email, from the devil, and I said, "Well, I'm trying not to get defensive here," but I was very defensive. One of my other brothers then, helped add fuel to the fire by saying, "Well, you sounded defensive to me." Sooner or later one of us is going to have to act like a follower of Jesus, and I have been praying all week that my brother would act like a follower of Jesus.

If you want to love somebody, you have to spend time with them. And it's not just spending time, it's having the humility and the grace to address what's broken and to begin by God's grace to fix it. Love God. Love others. Spend time. Fix what's broken. And then, express your love. You know the joke about the Norwegian, I told it once, so I don't have to tell it again. We express love or it's not love. If you do not share your love, it's emotion. If you do not express your love, it's just what you know, it's not what you experience. We need to find ways to express our love.

I hope you still have your Bibles open to the Gospel of Mark. Mark is known for its brevity. It's short. It's concise and known for its pace. We'll discover that in these next six weeks. It goes *immediately* this, *immediately* that, *immediately* this, and Mark is also known for its emotion. There are more emotions expressed by Jesus and by others (fear, anger, joy, sorrow, tears) in Mark than in any of the other stories about Jesus. Because it's brief, after Mark says, "Love God and love others," he moves on. But Luke tells the rest of the story.

Luke hears the same "Love the Lord, your God, love others" and his questioner asks, "Jesus, who is my neighbor I'm supposed to love?" Jesus realizes that loving people is a great idea until you have somebody in front of you that you're supposed to love, whether it's your brother or somebody you don't know. That's why Jesus tells the story of who the neighbor is, right? In the Jewish world, neighbor was understood as fellow Jews. Neighbor for the Pharisees was fellow Pharisees. Neighbor in the Essene world, in John the Baptist's world, was understood as other Essenes, so Jesus told a story about a good Samaritan. Now, that doesn't really mean much to us but it's an oxymoron. A good Samaritan is an oxymoron. I'm saying, there was a *good* Green Bay Packer fan. Just can't happen. He tells a story of how we are actually our neighbors. Instead of telling you a story, I'd like to *show* you a story about one of us, one of ours, trying to love God and love other people. Can we roll that please?

[Video begins.]

Loving people is something that I feel my parents do really well. When I didn't want to invite a girl in my preschool class to my birthday because she looked different, my mom made it very clear that was unacceptable. My mom was always making cookies for neighbors and taking me with her to visit people she called friends in the nursing home. It wasn't uncommon for my dad to mow someone's lawn or shovel their sidewalk. He would take me to lunch, and he didn't just know the people at Hardees, he was friends with them, laughing and joking around. My parents embraced and welcomed different people with all kinds of stories into our family and into our lives. As my understanding of Jesus and His love continues to mature and grow, I realize that it is only because He met me when I was alone and empty. That He loved me unconditionally in my dark places. That it isn't about my imperfections, but His grace and perfect love. That it is because of that, I am able to pour into and love the people I meet.

When I decided to go into social work in college, I was given many opportunities to interact with people I may not otherwise choose to spend time with. I spent time at domestic violence shelters, residential care facilities, and in elementary schools. My job became clear: love them, hear them, and at the end of the day, make sure they know they are cared about. And here's the thing, that isn't any different than how I'm going to treat my family, my best friend of seven years, or the women in my small group.

We are broken. We are hurting. We need forgiveness. We need to know that we are loved. This is what we are called to do. This is Jesus. Loving people well is not always easy, and I don't always get it right. In fact, it's exhausting and sometimes painful. It takes patience and time. There have been days when I'm getting off of work, walking into my home, and my neighbor stops me to talk about his sick wife. It's these small moments when I think I have nothing left to give that are the most holy. Jesus shows up and I know that He will give me just a little bit more.

And then there are also days at work when one of our residents screams at me and kicks me out of their apartment. It would be easy to walk away and not come back, to become bitter, but I'm reminded of the times that I drift away and Jesus continues to reach out to me until I latch on.

Jesus loves me. Jesus loves my neighbor who used to deal drugs. Jesus loves my exhausted coworker who doesn't believe in Him. Jesus loves the young man wrestling with his desire to get up every day and live. Jesus loves the single mother on county assistance, trying to work and feed her family. Jesus loves. Jesus loves them all. And so do I.

[Video ends.]

I watch that and I worry much less about the future of Jesus' church when young people are leading us. It's a reminder to me that the way that other people know the difference between what we believe and what we know is what we *do*. How will we love God? How will we love our neighbor? So here's my challenge to you. Every day this week, just for a week, for seven days, every day when you get up, before breakfast, say the Jesus Creed. And every night before you go to bed, the last thing you do, say the Jesus Creed again. And any time it comes to mind during the day, say the Jesus Creed. What's the most important thing in your life and how can it become more important? That's why we gave you these cards again.

I'd encourage you to put it where you can see it, wherever it is, probably for 90 percent of us it's in the bathroom. Put it in your car. Put it at your desk so that at least twice a day, morning and night, you can be reminded of what is the most important thing. Phrase by phrase, gesture by gesture, let's get this beyond our knowledge into our beliefs. Brothers and sisters, together, what is the most important thing?

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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: "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, it's not that I don't know, it's that I don't remember. And sometimes even when I remember, it's that I know but I'm not sure I really believe. I ask, Lord, that You would not turn this into just another religious duty but that You would make it the doorway to life. That when we turn and say, "I love You, God," You would surround us with love that will not let us go. And when I say that I love my neighbor, You will give me a chance in ways that help me see You at work in their lives and in my life. You are the God of love. You are the Savior of grace, you are the Spirit of peace. In all these things, lead us. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.