

Texts: Mark 12:28-34

Subject: The Great Commandment

Theme: Loving Well

4 Lent; Mar. 22, 2020, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,
Amen.

All around the world, *this* Sunday morning is a little different. When many people would be in church - (many? ok - not as many as we might hope - but quite a few) church buildings are mostly empty. Maybe occupied with a couple of pastors, deacons, musicians, and custodians. Many churches are online today - you can watch your favorite! Even better, it's pajama day - no need to get dressed at all! So if you're watching and worshipping with us in real time, thank you! We're glad you're here! If you're watching this after waking up late, or after lunch, or before bed Sunday evening - that's great too! We're glad you found us! As a gadget guy - if not a full blown geek - I'm online a lot, (too much) and I love seeing the ways we worship as Lutherans, Catholics, Methodists, Jews, Muslims, and more! I think worship matters. I think the gathering of community is sacred - we share holy time together when we are in the same place to hear the Word, to receive communion, to share in each others' lives. But guess what - you're here. I know you are, because I can see on my screen that there are a number of you watching this live - and I know we're not alone. We might be sad that we can't all be physically here right now, but online community *is real community*. We are not separated when we are together to chat, comment, discuss, debate, and listen to one another. We can use this technology to come together to hear the Word of God, to pray together, to share our hearts in so many ways. Most of all, we are doing this for a reason - because we love each other enough to keep a safe distance, to keep each

other healthy, to prevent any more transmission of the Coronavirus, COVID-19. But it's hard, because we like to worship together. We love the church, and we work hard to care for this old building, just like we work hard to care for each other. We've said it so many times - but it bears repeating - the building is not the church - WE ARE THE CHURCH. Whether here or there - YOU are the church wherever you gather to pray, to listen, to learn, to serve, to share, to give, and to love.

You are the church.

Today we're still in chapter 12 of Mark's Gospel and we have heard Jesus teaching, serving, healing, and giving to God what is God's. Jesus has traveled to Jerusalem and is at the center for worship there - the temple. There he turned over the tables of the money changers - disrupting the system. The Temple was the place where people would come from all over to bring their sacrifice to God, as a central practice of worship. Jesus had been arguing with many different people - there are Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and now a scribe comes to ask a question. This guy is not like the rest, he's not trying to trick Jesus, but genuinely wants to hear his answer to the question: "Which commandment is the greatest?" After seeing Jesus' actions in the temple, this scribe really wants to hear Jesus' teaching, and I think what he is asking Jesus is "what matters most?"

Well, if you're reading along with us in Mark's Good News, you'll remember there was a rich man a couple of chapters ago that asked about what he should do to inherit eternal life - and Jesus ran down the list - "you know the commandments." Now, you'd think they're ranked in order, right? Well - that must mean the greatest commandment should be the first - the one about You shall have no other gods. Let's go with that. And

that's pretty much the answer from Jesus, but he quotes from scripture - Deuteronomy 6:4 - it's called the Shema - the word means hear, or more accurately, *listen*. This is a central prayer still today for our Jewish neighbors, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is your God, the Lord alone." This same prayer is found on a scroll in the mezzuzah, the box pinned to the doorway of Jewish homes, wrapped in the *tefillin*, a box bound to the hand or forehead and used in prayer. This is central to the life of faith for the entire Jewish community. It's about devotion to God. He goes on: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and strength." (Deut. 6:5) The scribe should know this, of course.

Jesus goes on to add one more piece. "You shall love the neighbor as yourself," (quoting from Lev. 19:18).

It's not a new idea. There's a lot of talk about neighbors in scripture. People love to ask Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" One central idea in the Hebrew Bible is showing hospitality, Jesus carries this into His ministry when he preaches the sermon on the mount, feeds 5,000, and teaches about caring for the least of those among us. Loving the neighbor is deeply connected to loving God and our true act of worship.

Does God care if we're all packed into the pews Sunday morning? What do you think about this? Is going to church the main tenet of our faith? Which church did Jesus attend? Feel free to answer in the comments. Jesus' words lined up with his actions, and his walk was always toward those in need. He went out of his way to bring healing to people, even to raise them from the dead. He told the story of the good Samaritan, who stepped in when others wouldn't to make a difference, and ate with sinners, tax collectors, and spent time with outcasts. Jesus sums up the whole of the Torah to

answer the question of what really matters: “Love the Lord and love your neighbor as yourself.”

So today, we find ourselves far away from each other - 6 feet apart at least, no movie theaters, no bars, no casinos - the Las Vegas strip is dark. Many of you are off from work or out of work for the time being. Why must it be this way?

So that we can love our neighbors.

It’s not easy. We don’t always like it. But in a crisis, and we are in a crisis right now across the world - we know it is what we must do to love one another and we are loving well. People are staying home to keep from spreading the virus, to keep elderly parents from falling ill, to prevent those with compromised immune systems, or other conditions, safe. People are sacrificing their schedules, their careers, their vacations and travel plans so that we can get through this without risking more deaths. Many are washing more, paying attention more, and praying more.

How do we care for neighbors in this difficult time?

Tyler Huckabee - *no relation to a former Arkansas governor* - is the editor for Relevant magazine and shared some ideas this week on how we can love each other well during the time of Coronavirus.¹ I’ll just share a few:

Check in on each other - it just takes a phone call, a text, an email. Pastor Matt calls me to check in - other pastors have called me to check in - I’ve called many of you too. I check in with family members and neighbors. This week I visited with some neighbors here around the church, and most are following the same habits, checking on on each other. My next door neighbor Ed brought us bacon. He’s a keeper.

¹ <https://relevantmagazine.com/life5/here-are-a-few-ways-to-love-your-neighbor-well-in-coronavirus-season/>

Host an online meeting - our church council met online this week for the first time, but I've seen others that have met for online game night, online prayer & Bible study, and even online happy hour - why not? You're not going anywhere, right? I talked with our bishop Deborah Hutterer of the Grand Canyon Synod this week, and I let her know that I've been on so many online conference calls, I think I'm a little worn out from all this social distancing. and she's been in ten times as many Zoom meetings, I'm sure. We're finding out we are more connected than we thought.

Support local businesses - so many of the restaurants we love to visit are hurting right now since they can't have diners in close proximity, so they're doing more delivery than ever, and cooking for carryout orders. In the news here this week, we heard about one of our downtown neighbors Esther's Kitchen and owner James Trees who cut his dining room in half yet kept his entire staff employed to serve customers. This week they were robbed. Not what they needed. They're just up the road from us, off of Main street around the corner from Martin's Mart. Check them out if you can. There are so many more small business hurting right now.

Support a local food bank - Of course we do this already, but right now, with kids out of school and so many out of work in our city, ThreeSquare is no longer delivering to Lutheran Social Services of Nevada so they can serve large food drops at schools and larger locations. This means LSSN is in need of food and monetary gifts to continue to serve a city in need. Just this week, the DigiMart pantry at LSSN served 368 families - **over 1,000 people** - with Emergency Boxes of food. They can purchase a lot of food for a little bit of money, so every dollar we can give them right now goes a long way.

Find out who needs help - we have to ask to find out who might need a little assistance. Our neighbors here in Beverly Green and Huntridge put together a spreadsheet to alert one another to needs in our area, and have volunteered to coordinate help when I've asked this week as well. We have assembled snack bags for emergency relief here at the church, and Roger, Alfie, Kent and myself spent a few hours helping one of our local seniors to get laundry done and purchase groceries. Many are giving blood to replenish supplies locally. There are so many ways to help serve and love our neighbors.

The whole creation feels it. The earth is our neighbor too. In places where factories have been furloughed, where traffic has slowed, where business seems to have come to a halt, the earth is breathing easier. Air is cleaner, waterways are populated with wildlife, and plants are growing.

Why did we not see this kind of outreach before? Could it be that we weren't loving *ourselves* very well? If we were to love our neighbors as ourselves, if we were to show our devotion to God, and really put God first in our lives, we'd live a little differently. We'd find out what really matters. What would we be doing? Would we be caring for the world God made, working together for the sake of the least of those among us, breathing, and being and believing that we depend on each other for life and safety and health?

"The Lord is your God, the Lord alone. Love your neighbor as yourself." The scribe agrees, and Jesus has a good word for him. "You're not far from the Kingdom of God." If we understand that in caring for our neighbors, just as we care for ourselves and what is ours, we would show true devotion to God, and we too would be not far

from the Kingdom that Jesus brings. It shouldn't take disaster and disease to get our attention, but the truth is that loving well takes intentionality and so often we are distracted, overworked, selfish, and lazy. We dominate the earth and hoard supplies, and seek our own gain at the expense of others. Jesus demonstrates what loving well truly looks like - and loves us all the way to the cross. At the base of it are our goals and plans and achievements, our ego temples, and our and self-pity cathedrals. To make the world new, to bring life from death God raised Him up and through the power of the Holy Spirit brings us with him into the true kingdom.

What really matters? Jesus matters. Jesus shows us what loving well really looks like. Loving well means caring about the ones at risk, the ones in need, and the ones nearest to us. The next ones we see. We don't know when we'll be able to be together again in this place. But until then remember that YOU are the church. You are NOT alone. Jesus is with you. And so are we. Amen.