

If you hadn't noticed, it's election eve eve. Over 74 million people have already voted. I hope you have or you will. If anyone thinks the election will be called on Tuesday night or that one candidate will graciously concede to the other and we'll simply move on to the next order of business, I applaud your optimism and faith in humanity.

We forget sometimes that democracy is meant to be messy. It's designed *for* argument to exist. For compromise to *be* essential. No person or party is meant to fully control the government. America is of the people, by the people, and for the people.

But it's hard to deny that our country has rarely been so polarized as it has been over the last few years. These days, we have lost the art of compromise. Rarely is there bipartisanship. Things have been difficult, and mostly, we feel that the government is barely able to function.

These days, we don't listen to both sides of an issue. We live in an echo chamber where we only hear what we agree with, and we presume to know what the other side will say before they speak. We have lost our ability to listen. We don't ask open-ended questions. We just talk over each other and think the worst about those in different camps.

It's gotten so bad that, for me, when I hear particular words and phrases, trigger words that are loaded with political significance, I get instantly upset, because we are prone these days to feel defensive about our beliefs and angry toward those who think differently. We have no hope in constructive dialogue. The arguments get very personal.

That's why I think today's scripture text from Mark 12 is the most perfect text for today, so before we go any further, let us pray for wisdom and listening ears.

Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Our text today picks up in the midst of a scene, so let's start with the who, what, when, where, and why.

First, we should note that Jesus has made it to Jerusalem. We've been following him for a while, and now he's arrived with palms and parades and cheers of Hosanna. Everybody knows he's in town, including the authorities. The chief priests and scribes approach Jesus publicly and start questioning him about what authority he has and where it came from. Then they leave, and in verse thirteen, it says, they sent some Pharisees to try to trap him. They ask him about taxes and marital relationships in the afterlife. You know, easy softball questions. He's facing cynical enemies around every corner. Wave after wave of difficult questions meant to trap him and create a narrative they can use against him.

It's not unlike the run up to the election, is it? The media is hungry for a gaffe – a mistake. Candidates are getting asked tough questions. An accidental sound bite that can be played over and over to prove the candidate is lying or flip-flopping is priceless. So, you have to have your guard up at all times, and hope that your team around you vets people well for one-on-one moments. You don't want any surprises at this point, every question can be a set-up.

So, that's the backdrop for our scripture today. Jesus, in public in Jerusalem, being challenged with wave after wave of questions designed to entrap. So now, hear these words from Mark chapter 12.

<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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now, many of us know this story. Jesus declares there are two great commandments, but what just happened? The ending of the story is fascinating, because something Jesus said came as such a surprise that after that no one dared to ask him any more questions. Let’s look at this conversation between Jesus and the scribe a little closer and see what happened.

When it says, “One of the scribes came near” we have no idea if this person was sent by his boss with yet another tricky question for Jesus or if he was innocently coming upon Jesus and the Pharisees, but it seems to me that, either way, he was an open-minded person because it says he heard the dispute and saw that Jesus answered well. He wasn’t already convinced that Jesus was a fraud or a dangerous imposter. He listened and considered Jesus’ response thoughtfully.

Then, he asked a question of Jesus. Again, we don’t know for certain if he was sincere in his question or if he was one of the many sent to test Jesus.

But, regardless, there is something significantly different about how Jesus answers this time. Often, when asked a question, Jesus responds with a question. When the Pharisees asked about taxes, Jesus took a coin and asked, whose face is on this coin? When they asked about whose authority he was working through, he told a parable with biting symbolism.

But this time, Jesus answers directly and efficiently. He is asked which commandment is greatest, and he responds with, “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. The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Rarely in the Gospels is Jesus so straightforward. And I'm grateful for that. Preaching on hard-to-understand parables and mysterious symbolism keeps preachers in business. If Jesus had always answered like this – clearly and directly, you wouldn't really need me.

So the scribe listens to Jesus and seems to hear him again and respects what he has to say again. He tells Jesus, "You are right, Teacher. This is more important than whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

And in that moment, Jesus hears the scribe. Jesus may have been suspicious about his motivations. He may have been frustrated and tired from the theological sparring he had been enduring. Knowing what his week would hold, he may have just wanted to go find a place to eat and sleep, but something about the scribes response struck him, and he replied, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Wow.

But what does this passage have to do with us this election eve eve?

We know we are called to love God and love neighbor. It's kind of the bedrock for all we do, and we're pretty proud of the job DCCC,P does at fostering that love, in light of the divisive polarization this country has gone through and the election results coming in this week, I want you to think about what it means to love God fully and to love your neighbor and love yourself. What does that look like, practically? How do you show it?

There are many ways to express love for God and family and friends and community. Each of them are lovely. One way to express love is not more important than another, or so I thought. Just this weekend, some of you made dinner for the homeless. Some of you helped a woman with a task she couldn't do on her own. Madison, Jerry, and I painted the interior of a Habitat house. Some of you are taking care of grandchildren or parents or other family members. And if you're within the sound of my voice, you've chosen to worship God,

a beautiful act of love. I always thought that there was no way to rank different demonstrations of love, but I read something this week that has really challenged me.

I'll start by saying, I don't normally sit around in my spare time reading the works of nineteenth and twentieth century theologians. Thinkers like Paul Tillich often write things that are way over my head, but this week, I came across a quote in his book, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analysis and Ethical Applications* (you know that one?) which says, simply, "The first duty of love is to listen."

I want you to think about that for a moment. "The first duty of love is to listen." Perhaps, even right now, you're thinking, nah. The first duty of love is loyalty or providing for needs or faithfulness, or something like that, but I've been mulling over his statement, and even if you're not convinced he's right, I hope you find it's at least worth thinking about.

If we are commanded to love God, then is our first responsibility to listen to God? How much time do we conscientiously give to listening? Is God having to scream at us to get our attention? Or use back door channels to send a message?

And is your first responsibility to your loved ones to listen to them? To genuinely ask how they are doing, what's on their mind, and what they need from you? Does that demonstrate to them that you love them?

We are commanded to love our neighbors – and that means everybody – not just family but coworkers, church members, and strangers. How do we begin to listen to people we barely know?

And don't forget, we are commanded to love ourselves. Do we listen well to our own hearts and minds, or do we hit the mute button inside of us and fill our ears instead with distractions to the neglect of our own soul?

This is getting pretty deep and existential, so let me end with a story to illustrate my point. I have yet to finish the series, but years ago, several preacher friends watched the Apple Plus tv show *Ted Lasso* and quoted it from their pulpits. I've watched a few episodes. It has a lot of cursing in it, but the writing and character development is outstanding, and

whether you've seen it or not, you may know one of its most famous scenes. Ted, the main character, and the show's most vile character, Rupert, are in an English pub, and they begin to play darts. Rupert is winning, and they've made a significant wager that will affect many people. Ted has fallen behind and has to hit three perfect shots to win.

But Ted is relaxed. He casually tells Rupert a story about how he was picked on as a kid, but everything changed for him when he saw a quote painted on a wall that said, "Be curious, not judgmental." The bullies, Ted says, were never curious. They weren't picking on him because there was something about Ted they didn't like. They never cared to ask questions or learn about him. If they had, Ted said, they would learn that Ted and his father hung out at a sports bar during his childhood and that he had played darts for years. Then, spoiler alert, he hits the three perfect shots and beats Rupert in front of the crowded onlookers at the pub.

Be curious, not judgmental. That should be a bumper sticker on every car in America. Be curious, not judgmental.

What is it that you are judgmental about these days? It seems like we all have a list. What would it mean if you let go of the judgmental attitude and genuinely wanted to understand the thoughts of the people on the other side of the issue?

That may seem like a stretch, so if having a deep, vulnerable, emotional conversation with a person of a different political opinion this week is a non-starter, then start by intentionally listening for the voice of God this week. Make time to listen to your loved ones. And perhaps listen to someone on the other side of an issue who is writing, or reporting, or responding to the events of the day.

Jesus says the most important job we have as Jesus-followers is to love. Tillich says step one in loving others is listening to others. Lasso says when you listen, you should be curious, not judgmental. Jesus, Tillich, Lasso – they're not the Holy Trinity, but they're a pretty smart trifacta. Go, my friends, and practice the great commandments and remember what Grandma used to say. "God gave us two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak." Thanks for listening to me today. I feel the love. Amen.