

Gospel - Mark 12: 28-34

Pentecost 23

Sermon 10.31.21

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This being the Sunday closest to All Souls Day, I want to reflect with you about our overlapping lives of love. The foundation text for this reflection is our reading from Deuteronomy which features the Shema Israel; being translated 'Listen and Hear, Oh Israel'. The Shema is central to Jewish practice, identity, and theology. It is a call to attention, an affirmation of the oneness of God, and a summary of the central commitment to love the One who accompanies the beloved people from slavery to freedom. Recitation of the Shema twice daily is a biblical commandment for Jews, and is at the heart of morning and evening prayer. Linda Noonan's commentary also points out that for millennia, Jews have embodied these words not only through speaking, singing, praying, and chanting, but also by fixing them on the doors of their homes in mezuzahs which contain parchment inscribed with this most important of commands. These and the other tools mentioned were designed as daily reminders to keep the primary 'Love Commandment' front and center in their lives and held closely in their hearts. For many Jews, these are the first words considered upon rising, the last words spoken before sleeping, and the last words whispered before dying.

Jesus references this same text from Deuteronomy in today's Gospel, using it to ground his teaching in response to the scribe's question, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' The answer, we know, is to love God with all one's being as demonstrated by the actions of loving our neighbors as ourselves. This primary commandment would have been most familiar to the Sadducees and Scribes listening to Jesus that day. In fact, any other answer would not have passed their test. To this, the scribe who asked the question adds a rather controversial post-script; "Yes, this (commandment) is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices". I can imagine the Sadducees weren't too pleased with this scribe's conclusion, but perhaps Jesus sensed a brave and radical streak with this scribe, making him a perfect candidate for the coming kingdom.

Lately I've been settling into the word 'overlapping'. As I say that word I visualize how a bird's wing is composed of feather overlapping on feather overlapping on feather to enable flight. One of the definitions of 'overlapping' in the Oxford Dictionary reads: "partly coinciding in time". Our lives are full of innumerable examples of overlapping by temporarily sharing our co-incidence in time with others. There are life-long overlaps like marriage or the raising of children. But our lives are also crowded with momentary overlaps with strangers likely not to be seen again. They too can be the ready receptors of the seeds of forgiveness and grace hastily strewn by the utterance of a silent prayer for that unknown, unnamed one.

I think we have all heard the tender stories of how the death of one spouse can shortly lead to the passing of the other. After decades of intimate and interdependent overlapping, the spouse left alone may not be able to continue a life without the beloved, and may pass on into fuller life, rejoining family gone before into the wholly new experience of Love's continuous overlapping with us, even beyond this life.

I also consider parents who may lose a child, sometimes after only a few hours or days of a bittersweet encounter with Love's face. That kind of overlap, brief though it may be, can be filled to the brim with loving tenderness, grief, and yes, even gratitude for the precious fleeting time spent with a new little person who could not stay.

In the recitation of our Creed we regularly declare that "we believe in the Communion of Saints". For me, that phrase immediately brings up images of the "Great Cloud of Witnesses" praying for us still, cheering us on, and continuing to overlap with us in love from behind the thin veil that shrouds but can never separate the Body of Christ transversing Earth and its Heavenly realm.

Now, I admit that I have pretty little in common with Saint Augustine with respect to theology and doctrine. However, he wrote something I first discovered on the memorial cards distributed at Deacon Bill Batstone's funeral at St Edwards earlier this year. Listen to this.
Shema St Davids Church!

"Death is nothing. I only have passed to the other side. I am me. You are you. That which we were for each other we are still. Speak to me as you have always done. Don't use a different tone. Don't adopt a sad or solemn air. Continue to laugh at those things that made us laugh together... pray, smile, think of me, pray with me. I am not far, just on the other side of the path. Dry your tears for I am still with you."
-St. Augustine

As I fast approach age 70, I am increasingly aware that the time remaining for meaningful overlap with others seems to draw shorter each day. As a new member here, I am also aware that we can never really give to others our communal histories. I can hear about the remarkable journeys of this beloved community, and I can read all about it in the wonderful collection of historical memorabilia compiled by Norm and others. However, I cannot actually go through what you have gone through. What we can give to each other, though, is the fullness of ourselves today as we are being uniquely shaped by our shared experiences together.

From my time-limited perspective, I observe that over the past two or three years, this little family has bid farewell to many dearly beloved and long-standing members. Without their physical presence here, some may understandably feel disoriented for a time as the community adjusts to their loss. Marriage and Family therapists like to use the analogy that family is like an artistically suspended mobile, hanging in delicate balance, holding the interconnected parts arranged to maintain equilibrium. Remove one or more pieces from the mobile, and what happens? The balance and stasis of the whole shifts significantly by the removal of even one part. By gently turning and adjusting over time, the artist can shape a whole new equilibrium until the mobile is floating again with new balance and beauty.

So, today is our time to honor those who have generously given themselves to the mission of St Davids. They lived out God's Love, finding in our overlapping lives an aperture through which God's law of Love can be enfolded as us in this sacred place.

I'd like us to do something together now. In their commemoration, let us speak the names of those dear ones that come to mind. Those we have loved overlapping with in this community; those we miss and will never forget. Please take a moment now to notice who comes to your memory. There's no need to close eyes or bow heads. Simply speak their names simultaneously or one by one. We can expect to hear names repeated more than once. This is kind of like the practice we currently use during our prayers of the people.
So, let's begin. (Wait until the last voice is heard). Thanks be to God.

Today I personally want to also honor Bishop John Shelby Spong who passed on into full newness of life on September 12th. I commemorate his blessed memory because he is the one whose progressive teachings gave me the gentle shove I needed to join this church.

Bishop Spong leaves us with a simple mission:
"to live fully,
love wastefully, and
become all that we can be....
for that is where God is made visible."

-amen