

This Sunday's texts:  
Genesis 12:1-3  
Ephesians 4:1-13  
Mark 12:28-34

**Lifestyle of Grace: Community**  
**Pastor Jim cords**  
**March 5, 2023**

The holy Gospel for this second Sunday in Lent comes to us from the Gospel of Mark the 12th chapter:

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?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: '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 greater commandment greater than these." Well said, Teacher," the man replied, "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no one other but Him. To love Him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

The Gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, open our hearts and minds to the truth of who you've made us to be. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lifestyle of Grace. How does Grace impact us such that our lives are transformed in, and through, and for the grace of God? Who are you? Name, dad, husband, brother, friend, or as Joe communicated very well last week in his sermon, I am a child of God. Amen? We're still trying to get that one to lock in because too often our experiences and our own shortcomings cause us to question if we could be a child of God. But God is clear. Through Christ, He makes you a child of God. Amen. But if I ask you who you are today, I'm a preacher talking to a congregation. I know that some of you on Sunday morning walking out the door, have said, "Gosh, I feel like that sermon was just for me." But it's for you. In Texas, it's easier, even though they misuse it all the time, because I can say y'all.

We are the family of God. We are the Church. I want to suggest to you that the Church, we, are in crisis. Some of that crisis comes from Covid and the separation that it wrought on us. Some of that crisis at St Tim's is all the changes that have happened, some in staffing and in pastoral leadership, some in people

who left in Covid and either moved away or passed away or just have not returned. So the church just is not the same because the same people aren't here and so we feel less connected.

Some of that crisis has been nurtured into your worldview as Western thinkers because you think as individuals and your identity is found in that individual idea that “I am me. I am unique. and I only choose to interact with others when I want to, when I need to.” It's centered on a vision of self as an individual. Now I know that you may find this hard to believe, but that's not true of most of what we often call minority communities. It's actually not true in the majority of the world. In the majority of the world, apart from the Western industrialized nations, the people have an identity that is community-based. They know themselves as a “we,” at the very least as a family, but often as a village, as a community, and their first sense of identity is I'm and they state the name of their village, the name of their people-group. That's who they are. When we lose a sense of that, we lose a great sense of who God has created us to be.

Pastor Joe threw a stumping question at me this morning. I'm just throwing this in at this point in the sermon, so pause/hold [the slideshow]. What is the first experience in the Bible of something that's not good? My first thought went to Cain and Abel. But then I thought, oh no, it's not Cain and Abel. It's the tree, right? I mean, it's the fall; it's the sin. He said, “No. God created man and He said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone.’”<sup>1</sup> And then God creates woman. And He jumps for the first time from it being good to it being *very* good.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are made, we are created for community. When we don't have it, we know deeply that something is lacking in our lives. When we don't have it at church, we know there's something lacking in our faith and in our faith community.

Let's keep that in mind, then, as we think about things like the Golden Rule. You know, the Golden Rule is a moral obligation to treat others ethically for their sake, not ours, even if it's better than the way they treat us. Why? Not because it's an advantage, but because it's the right thing to do. We are to treat others as we would want them to treat us. You've heard that, right? You know that Golden Rule, right? You know it's not in the Bible, right? That's not what the Bible says about how we're to treat others. In fact, it talks about it in the form of the Great Commandment. Sometimes, if you ask people what is the Great Commandment, they might even answer “love your neighbor as yourself” I want to suggest that if you don't have the first part of the answer, you get the second part of the answer

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:18

completely wrong because it will come across as a law that you cannot accomplish. In fact, “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.”<sup>2</sup> The first commandment is there is one God and we are called to love God with everything we are, through and through.

“You shall not take vengeance,” Leviticus 19 tells us, “nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>3</sup> Did you think Jesus came up with this? This is Old Testament Levitical law. It says when there's a problem, don't avenge yourself. Instead, love your neighbor. Maybe that's where “forgive as you've been forgiven” comes from because when there's that kind of antagonism that happens between people that we have this desire to take vengeance, we're called to forgive as we've been forgiven. Hard to do. Amen? Hard to do.

I want to suggest to you that, in the order of things, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself,” there's a reason that it comes in that order. It's so that we look first to who God is. And as we discover who God is and that he loves us, and as we discover who God is and that he loves others, that then by looking at who God is, we turn to love our neighbor, not by looking at who they are. Who is my God will determine who I am and what my actions are. That will be the cause for loving my neighbor. It's not about who my neighbor is. It's about who I am.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, we often read that story and we think, “Okay, the moral to the story is if there's a stranger hurt, we need to help them out. If there's someone in a bad way, we need to help them.” Well, that's a true part of the story, but when the story is over, Jesus asks the person listening to the story, who was the neighbor<sup>4</sup> and the answer was that ugly-looking Good Samaritan guy. How could a Samaritan be good? They're the enemy and Jesus says, “Go [be like Samaritan]”<sup>5</sup> Meaning this: “Don't worry about who your neighbor is. Go be a neighbor because it's about who God is and who you are, not who they are or what they deserve.” I do what's right for me to do because I'm a child of God. We do what is right for us to do, loving our neighbor, because we serve a loving God, who first loved us.

Listen to this from our second reading today. “As a prisoner *for* the Lord, [as a prisoner *for* the Lord – repeated for emphasis], then I urge you to live a life

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:18 (nkjv)

<sup>4</sup> Luke 10:36

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:37b

worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble.”<sup>6</sup> You know, I would think if I lived a life worthy of the calling I've received, I'd be pretty proud of myself. I would think that if I could actually live up to that kind of calling, people would look up to me. That would be a status thing, right? Wow, you're amazing! Way more amazing than I actually am, but it doesn't work that way. It says, “Be completely humble; be gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” And he suggested another way. “Carry one another's burdens.”<sup>7</sup>

Listen, it goes on. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body.”<sup>8</sup> What does that mean? There's one body. What is the one body being referred to here? Us, the Church. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope when you were called.” See the problem is this calling into the church, this redemption that brings us back to God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, also brings us together as the people of God. It flies up against the values that we've been taught in the western world our whole lives. That says that the individualism, self-sufficiency, uniqueness, autonomy, independence, aren't those all great things. That's when we think we've really got it together, but we're called instead.

It says “Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’”<sup>9</sup> The gifts you're given are so that you can be a part of the body. The uniqueness that you're given is so that you can be a part of the body. There's a community in which this life is lived out. It's not just about me. It's not just about you. It truly is about us.

And by the way, folks, if you're not uncomfortable yet, you might not be listening.

1 Corinthians, just before it says that, it says this. “A spiritual gift is given to each one of us so that we can help each other.”<sup>10</sup> Why does God bless you? So that you can help one another. How can you do that if you don't know each other? How can you do that if you're not involved in each other's lives? How can you do that if you only sit in the pew together on Sunday morning for an hour a week? That's not the church and most of you know it because most of you are connected to the church. Most of you feel good about the church because you have friends here, because you have people here who have been meaningful to you, who've been

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<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:1-2

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 6:2

<sup>8</sup> Back to Ephesians 4:3-4

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 3:8 (esv)

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:7 (nlv)

there for you through tough times, who've been connected, who come and sit next to you every Sunday because it's my friend and a part of the reason I come to church is to sit next to my friend. Now I like the preaching and I want to be there for the preaching. I see you make me feel a little bit better, but I'm really there because I'm connected.

So imagine how it feels for those who are not connected. Or just stop for a moment and ask yourself the question. Who am I missing this morning? Who used to be here? Who was my friend who is not here anymore? Instantly, I see a heavy sigh, the grief, the loss because those relationships are real. I want to encourage you. If those people are still around, give them a call. Reach out to them. Invite them back, invite them over for coffee, or go see them because those connections matter. Those connections are worth investing in in the life of the church. Covid and change have robbed us of so many of those important connections that were created to live in. There's such joy when you live in that community, when you're recognized.

We were hiring a youth director at our church in Tucson and one of the candidates at a get-together, to get to know them, asked the question of the youth in the church. Said what do you like best about this church? One of our youth said the best answer I could have ever hoped for. She said, "I know I'm loved there." This is in the midst of a youth group that doesn't quite have critical mass. You know the struggle when there are just not quite enough kids to make it a really fun time. She said she was talking about the adults that were delighted to see her when she walked into church on Sunday morning.

"I know I'm loved there." Do you know you're loved here? Do you remember to say to others, to remind them that they're loved here? Brothers and sisters in Christ, this isn't just a need. This is our identity. This is who God created us to be, to go from it's not good to it's very good. Now you are the body of Christ and individual members of it. If you think you don't matter, you're desperately wrong. You matter. You have a role, a place, a part of the Body and the Body is not healthy without you. And the Body is not healthy without those who are missing. So I say we're a church in crisis because we need to be whole. I am the church and you are the church, but the truth is we are the church together. It's true here and it's true in our relationship with Christ Church throughout the world. As we meet brothers and sisters in Christ in other places, we need to see and identify them as our brothers and sisters, as those for whom Christ died so that we could be restored.

Holy Communion. We're taking it this morning and it is for you, but it is also for you, or maybe I should say it is for you and it is for y'all. When Christ gives His

blood and His body for you to redeem you and make you whole, to forgive you of sin, He's also forgiving you of those things that keep you from one another, as well as those things that keep you from Him, so that forgiveness and redemption are in the community. So it is communion for a community that God restores into His likeness.

More and more, we need to seek ways to live in community. Now I was talking to Joe about this because we're doing this series. You'll remember Lifestyle of Grace and a part of what we're trying to get into our heads, into our souls is a lifestyle of Grace is not striving to be something we're not. A lifestyle of Grace is simply enjoying living out the hope and joy, the goodness that God has already created in us. And I'm thinking, yeah, but Joe, I need to tell them to be nicer to one another. I need to tell them to be more welcoming to one another. I need to tell them to invest in friendships. Invite each other to coffee. Go out to dinner. Pray for each other. Talk to each other. Share each other's stories. That we got some stuff to do.

Then it dawned on me. I don't want you to strive into this. What I want you to do is open your arms and open your hearts and receive those whom God brings to you. Don't hold them at a distance. Welcome them into your lives. Don't be satisfied with a handshake or even a prayer on Sunday morning. Go for a walk. Have a meal. Enjoy an outing. Visit each other in your home. Invite people into your lives. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we're not simply called to invite people to worship, somewhat challenging sometimes, or even to invite people to Jesus, which is also somewhat challenging sometimes, even though we know we're supposed to do it, Amen? [murmurs] No, no, no. We want people to know Jesus. Amen? [congregation says amen].

But what we forget is that by inviting people into your life, it's where they're going to discover and see Jesus in you, the real Jesus in the midst of the mess and the muck, the real Jesus who helps us in our struggles as well as who helps us to celebrate, who gives us hope and joy and sustenance and strength, especially in the hard times. Sometimes, brothers and sisters in Christ, even as a pastor, I don't see Jesus very well until one of you shows up to love, to encourage, to share your faith with me, so that my faith mixed with your faith gives me hope. The lifestyle of Grace is a life lived in community, where we bear with one another, where we allow the love of God to pour through us to love others who we still need to invite into our lives, as well as our church, our struggles, and our faith. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are the church. Thanks be to God. Amen.