

In about three weeks Christ-followers, young, old, and in-between will gather in church courtyards and parking lots to wave palm fronds as they process to the strains of “All Glory, Laud and Honor.” Around the world shouts of “*Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*” will echo the cries that Jesus heard as he entered Jerusalem for the last time. His week would start with this joyful entry, take a shocking detour to Golgotha, and end in another kind of triumph...at the resurrection.

The “*Hosannas!*” had barely died down before groups of religious authorities started tossing questions at Jesus designed to make him look like an agent of Satan...or an insurrectionist against the Roman occupiers...or a false Messiah doing magic tricks. Just prior to our reading today, a group of Sadducees cooked up an elaborate imaginary situation involving a woman who had been legally married seven times...then they asked Jesus which man would be her husband at the resurrection. Jesus shook his head and replied to the Sadducees, “you guys don’t know much about scripture...*or God!*”

A Scribe was listening in to this exchange, and something prompted him to ask Jesus, “which commandment is the most important?” Jesus said, “Love God *the one and only God* with everything you’ve got...heart, soul, mind, and strength...*and* love your neighbor as you love yourself. Together, *nothing* is greater than these.”

The Scribe was so delighted that he repeated Jesus’s words and then *amplified* them. “That thing you said about, loving God and loving your neighbor?...it is *much* more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices!” The religious authorities listening would have been aghast! Imagine the reaction of the parish Finance Committee if you announced, “loving God and loving your neighbor is *WAY* more important than filling out that pledge card!” But the Scribe was not trying to blow up hundreds of years of religious tradition – he was sending a signal that Jesus had just said something *extraordinary*.

So...we might want to zero in a little more closely to that dialogue between Jesus and the Scribe. The *Shema* is a call to love the only God there is with, “all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength.” However, in Mark’s Gospel Jesus inserts a *fourth* quality to that list...“loving God with all our *mind*.” The original Greek here is *dianoias*, meaning, “full-breadth reasoning.” When the Scribe restates what

Jesus has said, the fourth element *he* adds is, “loving God with all our *understanding*.” The Greek word *sunesis* is used and it means, “holistic thinking.”

Jesus and the Scribe knew the *Shema* like they knew the backs of their hands, and altering the ancient words of Moses was *not* a casual choice. Jesus lobbed the word “*mind*,” at the Scribe as if to ask, “*do you hear me?*” The Scribe caught it...and threw back “*understanding*,” as if to answer, “*yes...yes I hear you!*” If we listen closely to their interchange *we may hear* the **click** a key makes when it opens a lock.

Loving the one and only God with heart, soul, and strength puts us in harmony with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who called us into being. We can love ourselves because we are bathed in the love of our creator. Adding “*understanding*” to the list opens an even deeper call that makes it possible to extend love for God, and for ourselves, to our neighbors. But make no mistake, “loving our neighbors” can get complicated in a hurry!

Sure, many of us don’t have to think twice about whipping up a casserole for a sick friend. Our hearts are moved to donate to a charity that provides hospital care for kids. We may have a harder time loving the neighbor who has a worldview so different from ours that it’s difficult to believe we live the same universe. It is often frustrating to try to love neighbors with whom we are at odds on matters of politics, or science, or human rights.

Our natural tendency is to reduce beliefs about problems to a “right side” and a “wrong side.” If we insist that others fully align with our own views before we will work with them on *problem-solving*, there will continue to be people sleeping on the streets of Houston, and Seattle, and New York, and Atlanta. The wrecking ball of racial injustice will continue to slam into the lives of people of color. There will continue to be children of God who walk hundreds of miles *to cross the river* that divides the land of hunger and danger...from the land of *a chance* for something better. These are some of the thorniest issues in the world, and even the Christians in this room may not agree. But we know we have to get moving because there’s a neighbor living with the consequences of what we *do...or don’t do* about each problem.

There is Good News in Mark’s Gospel for us this evening! As people who *really* need to come together to tackle the pressing problems affecting our neighbors,

this scripture invites us to dip a cup into the river of “understanding.” When we drink deep from the waters of “full-breadth reasoning,” and “holistic thinking,” the Holy Spirit is by our side as we navigate through the obstacles that divide us.

Right about now we may be wondering what tapping in to that river of understanding actually looks like. Perhaps a good place to start is to think about how we have spent our time over the past few days. We have gathered around tables to focus on helping local congregations grapple with racism... and we’ve developed strategies for meeting the practical needs of migrants and asylum-seekers. Just this afternoon some of us came here to look at Christ Church Cathedral’s model for serving those experiencing homelessness in Houston.

In a few moments we will gather around another table...*God’s table*...in gratitude for the grace we have all been granted through Jesus Christ. Tonight we will receive the bread of heaven and drink from the cup of salvation. Tomorrow we will journey home and convene tables to apply “full-breadth reasoning” and “holistic thinking” as we seek to love the neighbors in our communities.

On his last visit to Jerusalem Jesus was surrounded by Chief Priests, Pharisees, and Sadducees who were making plans to have him killed...and many Scribes were co-conspirators in that plot. By all rights, the Scribe who asked Jesus, “which is the greatest commandment?” shouldn’t have been genuinely interested in the answer. But on that day that Scribe’s mind was open to *hear* and to *understand* the message that loving God is *inseparably bound up* with loving our neighbors.

It is only *within the crucible of understanding*, that the flame of God’s Holy Spirit has the power to burn away the paralysis of our differences. What remains is the last thing Jesus said to the Scribe that day in Jerusalem ...“*you are not far from the Kingdom of God.*” Jesus offered hope and possibility...where none *should have* existed.

As we face our own seemingly impossible difficulties with figuring out how to love each other like we love ourselves, Jesus invites us to drink from the river of understanding with those same words:

“*You are not far from the Kingdom of God.*”

Don’t stop...keep going...keep going!”

Amen