

TEXT: Mark 12:28-34

TOPIC: Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is: Love God, love neighbor, love self.

SUBJECT: There comes a point when love must get vile, so ministry is consistent with belief.

TITLE: When Love Gets Vile

One of the funnier moments at Orders and Fellowship this last week was when Bishop Watson told everyone attending that he realized how the general secretary for records and archives had given all the pastors permission to be vile in their ministries, and that would likely mean the cabinet and the Board of Ordained Ministry have an extra busy appointment season if clergy took the path of vileness.

Vileness is a reference to something John Wesley had said in 1739, when he was in Bristol, England, and instead of preaching in church buildings, he started his field preaching to the masses. Wesley referred to field preaching as “vile” but when Wesley started field preaching, he started living into God’s plan for his life, and – as Wesley believed – God has a plan for every one of our lives.

The Great Plains pastors were given permission to do what Wesley did by General Board historian Dr. Ashley Broggan. She referred to the practice of being vile as vile-tality.

Practicing vile-tality means looking beyond today’s acceptable practices, standards and norms.

So, why am I mentioning this? First, because today’s gospel lesson focuses on what ministry is when the world is our parish. Second, it speaks to the reason why I serve as I do. And third, it speaks to giving strong consideration to whether the morals we value are consistent with what we advocate for, and with the election just a couple days away, I think that’s important.

When the scribe comes to Jesus asking “what is the most important commandment?” I’m not sure the scribe knew what he expected Jesus’ answer would be. When Jesus answers, he references passages in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. The first is to love God. The second is to love others the way you love yourself.

Loving neighbor as yourself is important here because it references Leviticus 19 and I would say verses 17-18 where the instruction is to not secretly hate a neighbor. The Message Bible says if you have a bone to pick, get it out in the open otherwise you are accomplice. Likewise, don’t exact revenge against anyone. Instead, love your neighbor as yourself.

Today is All Saints Sunday. It’s the Sunday when we remember those who have finished their course of faith and rest from their labors, and when I think about those who have joined the communion of saints, I cannot help but think of their personality characteristics. Kindness. Good humor. Learning. Serving. Wisdom. I was particularly touched this last Monday when one of Marvin Petersen’s children said he was once asked who some of his favorite people are and his reply was “everyone.” For me, the saints this year include my sister, Sally, and my brother, Ray, and two cousins from my mom’s side of the family. They are part of my “everyone” and always will be.

For me, that raises the question: what vile practice am I willing to engage, so my neighbors know they are loved? I’m not talking just the people in my neighborhood along Highland Drive, but in those parts of Concordia Wesley would have gone because Jesus would have gone there? As Jesus says in each of the gospels, everyone is my neighbor, whether they are poor, mentally ill, addicts, or people crossing an artificial, man-made borders somewhere. Instead of secretly hating a neighbor or harboring a grudge because I have a bone to pick, I have

no business exacting revenge in whatever expression revenge might be expressed. My task is to love people the way I am supposed to love myself, so because I love myself, I should be loving everyone completely.

Yet, is that what the election picture looks like? Given how close the polls appear, I don't know.

When loving God and loving others as you'd love yourself is the first command, it should radically reorient and shape everything we do as individuals and as a church. When love radically reorients how we see ourselves, how we see our world, and everything we do, it speaks to what we value but more importantly should challenge us to consider whether our values align with what we support in our society. In this context, that means loving as Jesus loved can be a vile thing to do. Given this context, it means doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God is an act of vile-tality.

When the world is our parish, doing what's vile comes naturally. When the world is our parish, love is vile. When the world is our parish, we go to the places Christ would go and be with the people Christ is around. Do you know who those people are? In each gospel, they are not the people we find in the temple or in church. In each gospel, they are prostitutes, addicts, the possessed, the poor, widows, children, and so forth. They are vulnerable people.

The marginalized – the othered – are people I know have enriched my life, and they're people I know would enrich your lives when love has us do what's vile, and doing what's vile goes against the so-called "norms" of those who want power for power's sake. Doing what's vile means loving without counting the cost. Doing what's vile means being sacrificial in how we use our time, our resources, and the ways we live our lives.

I'm no exception to that. In the last several months, I've developed a craving to be with and work with folks who often go unseen. I've looked at myself and wondered why I spend as much time as I do when I could be utilizing time differently. I've looked at my work here and wondered if there are others who would like to go to the places John and Charles Wesley went. I've looked at myself and wondered how this thing called church or ministry and, especially, this crazy little thing called love could be done better and differently. I've looked at myself and wondered who would go with me to visit the low-income houses, and who would want to be part of developing support groups for various causes, and so forth. Mostly, as I've learned to love myself better, it comes out in every message I have been preaching – to encourage and challenge folks to think of themselves and our world and this ministry differently together.

I've done this because I know I could do a better job of aligning what I value with what I do, so I am more consistent. I've done this and invited folks to do the same because I get the concept of loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. I love all y'all, and if I am ever asked "who are your favorites" I hope I will respond just like our friend Marvin Petersen did because it reminds me so much of what I think Mr. Rogers would have said: Everyone is my favorite because everyone is everyone even when they think they aren't. And the reason is simple for me. If I love in a vile way, I believe that not only am I loving as Christ did; I'm loving in a way that is right on the border with God's kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven, and I'd want the same thing for all of you.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.