

What God Has Joined Together
Mark 12:28-34
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
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Monday night I took Sam to soccer practice out at what I call Southwest Community College and what everybody else calls State Tech. We hadn't had a chance to eat dinner, so after I dropped him off I went to go get something for myself, and I also was going to get something for him to eat after practice.

I had noticed a Burger King right down the road as we came in, so I went to the Burger King drive-through. I was going to order a Chicken Sandwich meal with drink and fries for me and a Whopper with cheese (plain) and fries for Sam.

The exchange went something like this:
Welcome to Burger King can I take your order?

I want a #7 with a Diet Coke—

That's a #7 with a Diet Coke. Drive through to the second window.

OK. I also want a Whopper with cheese—plain, nothing but meat and cheese—

Drive through to the second window.

Did you get the Whopper?

Second window please!

Look, are you going to let me finish my order?

All right. What else?

Forget it.

And I pulled out of the drive-through lane and drove off. I'm stubborn like that. As I was driving away from Burger King, I saw a Subway just down the way. That's better, more healthy, anyway, I thought to myself.

I went in, and I was the only customer there. I said, *I would like two 6 inch ham and cheese sandwiches.*

She said, *That's a 12 inch.*

I said, *What?*

She said, *That's a 12 inch.* And she got out a 12 inch sub and starting preparing it with the ham and cheese. Now, I was going to eat mine out at the soccer field and save Sam's for later.

So I said, *You know, I know that 6 + 6 equals 12, but I really do want two separate 6 inch sandwiches.*

She said, *OK.* She might as well have said, *Whatever.* She still didn't cut it in half to make two sandwiches. We moved down the line, she asked me what I wanted on it.

I said, *On one I don't want anything on it, and on the other I want mayonnaise and pickles, and that's all.*

She put the mayonnaise and pickles generally on one side of the sandwich. As she got ready to ring it up, she asked me, *So do you want this cut in two and wrapped separately?*

It's hard to love your neighbor.

There are just so many barriers that keep us from loving our neighbors.

Self-interest keeps us from loving others, because we fear that another person's advantage will create a disadvantage for ourselves.

Inconvenience prevents us from reaching out, because we are so resistant to leaving our own cultural, racial and political comfort zones. Distrust is a big barrier as well—we're afraid that if we lower our defenses, we might get hurt.

On top of this, we are often held back by our fundamental dislike of certain people. We don't like their hairstyles, clothes, music, food, work habits, attitudes and accents. We have a misguided sense that our religious purity would be threatened if we loved those who are different than we are.

Another barrier is a simple lack of personal interest. Many of us simply couldn't care less about people across the street, or around the world.

Another obstacle to love of neighbor is fear: We fear that we will be rejected, that we will offend, that we will be imposed upon, that we will be endlessly obligated.

Left to my own devices, I wouldn't be very good at loving my neighbors. But fortunately, Jesus doesn't leave me to my own devices. I don't have a choice. I have taken vows to love my neighbor when I said I was going to be a follower of Jesus.

Speaking of vows, I'm sure you're familiar with these words: *What God has joined together, let no person put asunder.* I've said those words many times at the end of wedding—after the vows have been agreed to, after the two have pledged to become one.

That pronouncement reflects God's intention concerning marriage: two become one, indissolubly one, inextricably one. In a Christian understanding of marriage two people are joined together so that their lives are fused.

Marriage does not join two people the way two blocks of wood are glued together, side-by-side. Two blocks of wood that are glued together can be unglued with the application of some kind of glue-dissolving solvent.

Once separated again, the two blocks are intact, exactly as they were before they were glued, simply because gluing them together never changed them in the first place.

Marriage is more like a tree graft. When one kind of fruit tree is grafted to another kind of fruit tree, the two trees thereafter grow into each other. They grow together so as to become a single organism.

Any attempt now at separating one tree from the other doesn't leave both trees intact; any attempt at separating one tree from the other doesn't leave even one tree intact.

To separate them is destructive and very painful for both. They are not the same as they were before. What God has joined together, no person should put asunder.

[Thanks to Dr. Victor Shepherd for this illustration. Dr. Shepherd is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Tyndale Seminary and Adjunct Prof. of Theology at University of Toronto]

In the Christian life there are other things in addition to married men and women that God has joined together. And in the Christian life to separate those things God has joined together is painful and destructive.

Two of the things that God has joined together are “loving God” and “loving neighbor”; God has joined together piety and practice.

Like a marriage between people, the union of piety and practice happens in the place of worship, in the temple. A scribe approaches Jesus with a question.

Notice that this scribe is presented in a positive light. Of the nineteen references to scribes in the gospel of Mark, this is the only one that is presented in a positive light. After a series here of entrapment questions from Herodians, Sadducees, and Pharisees, the understanding and sincerity of this scribe is refreshing.

Standing here in the institution that was the heart of Judaism, Jesus and a scribe go straight to the heart of their religion.

Which commandment is the first of all? the scribe asks Jesus.

Jesus answers like other Rabbis before him: *The first is, ‘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.*

The scribe says, *You’re right. You’ve said it right. To love God and to love your neighbor. This is much more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.*

The scribe agrees with Jesus, and Jesus agrees with the scribe. It is a rare and pleasant moment in the gospels. But agreeing is not enough. Jesus affirms the scribe for his wisdom, and then he says, *You are not far from the kingdom of God. You are close, but you’re not quite there. Just like the rich man in the earlier story, the scribe is lacking one thing.*

The one thing missing is following Jesus on the way and all the way to the cross. Like I’ve been trying to say the last couple of weeks, the kingdom of God is not agreeing on the right answers, as important as the search for truth is. The kingdom of God is living, doing, relating in ways that are inspired and informed by the love of God and the love of neighbor.

A proper Bostonian woman gushed to Mark Twain about her imminent departure for the Holy Lands where she would climb the actual mountain on which Moses received the Ten Commandments. Twain listened patiently before interrupting her ecstatic description with the suggestion that she should stay in Boston and try to obey them.

All of the commandments have been boiled down to these two. Really, I think what we're doing here today with our emphasis on our mission work as a congregation is highlighting our attempts to obey those two commandments. Highlighting our attempts love God and our neighbors.

All of these mission projects and ministries that you see out in the foyer today, and all of those that you've seen pictures of today on the screen:

Brinkley Heights
Because It's Right
Prison Ministry
Habitat for Humanity
Lifeblood
Medical mission trips
Memphis Interfaith Hospitality Network
Missionary House
Youth mission trips
Tennessee CBF
MIFA
Heifer Project
CBF Gulf Coast Mission Trips
Collegiate Ministries
Multi-national Ministries
Tennessee Adult and Children's Homes
Harold Andrew
Greg Oman

All of these are attempts to love our neighbors. And I think we know—I hope we know—that love of God and love of neighbor are joined together in holy matrimony. What God has joined together, no person can put asunder.

Whenever I read Mark's gospel two features of Jesus' life leap out at me. One feature is the amount of time Jesus spent praying, even spent praying by himself. Again and again we are told that Jesus went away by himself to a lonely place or a solitary place or a secluded place, and there he prayed.

The second feature of Mark's depiction of a day in the life of Jesus that leaps out at me is the little word *euthus*: "immediately."

Jesus ministers to a boy whose convulsions leave him flailing and frothing.

"Immediately" Jesus hikes to the next town where he finds hostile people with venom in their hearts whom he rebukes and reduces to silence as only he can.

Then "immediately" he gets into a boat (storm and all) and straightens out his disciples who have managed to misunderstand him again.

Then "immediately" he comes upon a sick child whose parents are distraught and a psychotic man whose violence has left him isolated.

[Thanks to Dr. Victor Shepherd for this insight]

We get indigestion reading about one day in the life of Jesus. He is a man of action, on the move, healing people, helping people, loving people, serving people.

At the same time, we know that Jesus arose a long while before dawn, when it was still dark, went off by himself, and prayed.

Love of God and love of neighbour, piety and practice, are fused together.

I came across this story. I don't know who told it. I just know it's an old story where a man is explaining how he found his faith. It goes like this.

It was in those years of too few dollars and days, and too many deliveries and diapers. We seemed to be always at odds, kids crying, not a dollar or an hour to spare.

I had signed up for a morning prayer group in our church, every Wednesday. It got that I dreaded going. I was tired; the meeting was chaotic, attendance spotty. I like things done right. One morning I didn't go. The next Wednesday my wife kneed me out of bed.

Our deal was to pray and then to take a card from a pack the pastor had of service needs. So I took mine: "Boy needs ride to Sayre Hospital tomorrow". That was the last straw, or almost the last straw: This is a whole day, not an hour—I didn't sign up for this! I huffed out.

Sometimes though after I blow off some steam I think different. That little card rode around in my jacket during work. When I got home I made the mistake of telling my wife about it. She didn't say anything, but she had that look and that jaw set back and that, you know, that attitude. About 11 pm I called the home and said I'd take the boy.

Early Thursday I drove across town. He was already there on the curb, alone and with a little suitcase. I was still so frosted about the whole thing I just kept silent for a while. I watched

him though from the corner of my eye. He took some cookies from the bag and offered me one. He watched the scenery. I saw him read a note that was wrapped around the cookies.

He was about 5. With our four girls I realized I didn't have much practice at talking to a boy. After a while he told me about his leg. It was something he was born with. The operation was going to help him walk right. They had to postpone it until his mother got work again. She had just gotten another job and was so grateful.

Then he asked me the most surprising thing I have ever been asked: "Mister, are you God?" He asked so sincerely that I stifled my laughter and asked what he meant.

He said:

Last night after dinner I got ready for bed. My mom was really upset. She said she had to go to work today or we would lose our house, but that I had to get to the hospital or my leg would not ever be right. She came into my room and prayed, "God please help us. God please take my boy to the hospital. God help us somehow for tomorrow."

When I got up this morning she told me God was helping us. So that is why I asked you: Are you God?

You ask how I found my faith? I found my faith by practicing my faith.

[This story was found in a sermon by Dr. Robert A. Hill, Asbury United Methodist Church, Rochester, New York, November 2, 2003]

So maybe you think you've got the right religious answers to the right religious questions. Maybe you don't; maybe you're you waiting to somehow get all the right answers before you actually begin living your faith.

Do you think it's enough to have the right answers or hold the right positions on the issues? Do you have this idea that if you vote the right way on Tuesday you're living out your faith? If you do, you're letting yourself off the hook way too easy.

Do you want to know how to find your faith, practice your faith, for real? Love your neighbor, for crying out loud.

I guess it's because it's election season, but I am so sick today of Christians who think that having the right beliefs about issues is the essence of being a Christian.

Having the right beliefs seems to be enough for some people

Well, it's not enough. Practice your faith!

Pray. Love God. Care for other people. Love people. I'm talking to myself here—love the worker at Burger King and Subway. Love the people you're voting for and voting against on Tuesday.

I had a message on my voicemail this morning when I came into my office. It was "Kelly" from the Family Action Council, whatever that is. She said she just wanted me to remind my congregation to vote "yes" this week on Proposition One (an amendment to the Tennessee constitution defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman).

I think I'm going to call Kelly back and tell her that what I really need is for her to call me every Sunday morning and remind me to remind my congregation to love our neighbors. Actually, I may see if Kelly could call me everyday and remind me to love my neighbor.

Vote for Proposition One or vote against it, but I'm telling you we better *love* the people... we better *love* the people. Or our religious words and votes are nothing but a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.

Practice what Jesus said is the essence of faith.

Loving God and loving our neighbors—those two have somehow become one. And what God has joined together, let no person put asunder.