

“Knowing What To Do” (fn.:MARK 12 28-34.2019.DOC)

Scripture: Mark 12:28-34 (Leviticus 19:1-4, 11-19)

William C. Pender

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 8/11/19

Mark 12:28-34: ²⁸ *One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”* ²⁹ *Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;’* ³⁰ *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.’* ³¹ *The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”* ³² *Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other;’* ³³ *and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* ³⁴ *When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.*

Knowing what to do...knowing what to do...the long history of Judaism is the history of a people that has known what to do. Judaism spread throughout the world. Knowing what to do is what makes you Jewish—NOT whether you are Anglo or Ethiopian, Arabic or Chinese. Now, granted the “knowing” has had some flexibility to it. If you listened closely to those words from Leviticus 19, you found expressions that continue to have value—honesty is a virtue; slander is wrong; honoring parents is good. But the prescriptions about not mixing fabrics—well, so much for our cotton/polyester blends! And what about not mixing breeds of animals—does that mean a “cock-a poodle” is an abomination—a mix of cocker spaniel and a poodle. And what about planting tomatoes and cucumbers together in the same field—forbidden in Leviticus, but now regularly done!

Knowing what to do...the long history of Christianity indicates a flexibility in “the knowing” as well. For example, faithful Presbyterians at one time did not see the ethical contradiction in owning property...property as in slaves. Presbyterians—both ministers and laity—participated in the accepted system of the way things are. And, after a visit last week to the Civil Rights Museum in Birmingham, Alabama, I was reminded of how we accepted the farce of “separate but equal.” Here’s what was said by sincere, caring people: “Why, the Negro can ride the bus”...failing to mention that it was in the back seats. “The Negro can drink water from public fountains”...failing to mention that it was only from the water fountains marked “colored.” “The Negro can go to school”...failing to mention only schools for Negroes, where class sizes were nearly double those of white schools, where salaries were 1/3 less for black teachers, where the spending per pupil was markedly different—for each dollar spent on white children, only 60 cents were spent on black students. And yet many thought that “separate but equal” was working!

Knowing what to do...many of us are struggling with what to do after last weekend’s tragedies in El Paso and Dayton. I get what I am about to say is inflammatory, but it got my attention. The following has been attributed to Gloria Steinem—a leading feminist—but she did not write it; rather, she posted it on her Facebook page. Here’s the post:

I want any young men who buy a gun to be treated like young women who seek an abortion. Think about it: a mandatory 48-hours waiting period, written permission from a parent or a judge, a note from a doctor proving that he understands what he is about to do, time spent watching a video on individual and mass murders, traveling hundreds of miles at his own

expense to the nearest gun shop, and walking through protestors holding photos of loved ones killed by guns, protestors who call him a murderer.¹

We legislate major restrictions on abortion...but not the purchase of weapons like that of the Dayton shooter—he had ammo magazines with 100 bullets. He could fire 100 shots without stopping to reload. He fired 41 shots in 30 seconds. And he had more to come with further ammo magazines. And you can order those ammo magazines on the internet.

Knowing what to do...we begin first by turning to Scripture. Jesus was asked to sift through all the commands and directions that come from God and to give the most important one. Jesus stretched the question into a twofold...or perhaps a threefold answer.

Love God...love neighbor...and love self (remember the command to love your neighbor has the additional qualification: love your neighbor “as you love yourself”—the “as” means “in the same way”...not “the same amount”). Some Christian notables such as Karl Barth and John Calvin are not convinced in threefold love. Love of self, in their view, always is tinged with self-interest and cannot be characterized as good. However, other notables, such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, see a threefold love. I take the latter point of view...with some hesitancy. What Barth, Calvin, and others note is that the love of self has the darkest shadow, particularly when it is the primary focus. We can point to so many ways that love of self has led to tragic and cruel results.

I suppose loving God has a shadow—there have been faithful people who have withdrawn from any contact with other human beings. For example, there was Simeon Stylites, who in the early 400’s set out to live on a small platform (about a yard wide) on top of a high pillar. Simeon, for the love of God, wanted to withdraw from the world: he simply wanted to commune with God and no one else. However, because he was so “withdrawn” from the world, people came from far distances to see him and consult with him. They asked him to make decisions in their conflicts—he was seen as an objective judge that had no reason to be biased. He was not influenced by money or power or status. Simeon lived on his little platform for 37 years. All for the primacy of loving God!

I suppose there is also a shadow connected with the love of neighbor...though I am hard-pressed to see that. I suppose there are people who are too compassionate for their own good...but not sure who they are. Perhaps there are people who are too-sacrificial...but I’ll let you come up with those examples.

Knowing what to do...Jesus set it out as love...a threefold love: love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. And, by and large, we all know more about that third love—love of self—than we do the other two. But love itself is a challenge for us.

You see, it seems to me that we try to be God more than we engage in loving God. Certainly that is one take-away from that story of the temptation in the Garden of Eden. What the first man and woman are offered in the eating of the forbidden fruit is to be “like God.” To be like God...how often that is what we seek, when what we are to do is to love God. And love does not insist on its own way, as the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13. But how we want God “to do it our way!”

¹ Many references to this can be found on the Internet. Here is one as 8/11/19:
<https://www.thecut.com/2017/10/gloria-steinem-quote-abortion-and-gun-rights.html>.

And, oh how we long to control people. Why can't people do what I know to be right thing, the best thing? Why can't those around me get their act together! But we are not meant to control people but to love people. And love bears all things, as the Apostle Paul also reminds us (1 Corinthians 13). Love endures all things.

And we are to love our life...not to own our life. Owning our life would mean that we could take any one of those self-help books or courses and make it work. No, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, love is not arrogant and that love hopes all things, even in the confused mixture we call our "selves." Love involves humility with our selves.

Knowing what to do...as schmaltzy as it sounds, it begins with love. And the ordering is key: God, neighbor, and self. We begin with God. I think we forget that one of the synonyms for worship is adoration. How often I let worship be a chore rather than adoration! After all, I get a pay-check to be here—that's motivation. But most of you have no more incentive to be in worship than this—to love God. To adore God.

I have heard all my adult life this explanation: "Preacher, I don't come to worship because you know God is everywhere. God is in nature...God is on the golf course...God is at the café where I get my coffee. God is there when I check my Facebook posts." Yes, I agree...but I want to ask: But do you adore God in those times? Are you spending time with God...Is your attention on God? Or, is that time primarily with yourself and those you want to be with? Yes, we can worship God anywhere...but do we? Do we practice the threefold ordering: God first, neighbor second, self third?

Jesus sets out this order of knowing what to do...it begins with love of God. And moves to the love of neighbor...and self is a distant third. Next Sunday, we will come back to the love of neighbor. And we will return to this love of neighbor over and over again, as our fall theme is "loving our neighbor."

Knowing what to do...not easy...particularly after last weekend, particularly as we look back at our history that blessed segregation and blessed slavery. Knowing what to do...I have found the words of the poet Wendell Berry helpful here. He said "that when we no longer know which way to go/ we have come to our real journey. /The mind that is not baffled is not employed. /The impeded stream is the one that sings."² The impeded stream—the one with rocks and obstacles...that is the stream or brook that sings...not the easy flowing stream.

And don't we know the impediments! One of the hymns we are going to learn from the new hymnal is #821. The author/composer was Robert Lowry (also the author/composer of "Shall We Gather by the River" and the Easter hymn "Up From the Grave He Arose.") While Robert Lowry

² From "Our Real Work" by Wendell Berry. The entire poem:

It may be that when we no longer know what to do

we have come to our real work,

and that when we no longer know which way to go

we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings. Copyright ©1983 by Wendell Berry, from *Standing by Words*.

died before Wendell Berry was even born, I think Robert Lowry knew that the “impeded stream” sings.

My life flows on in endless song, above earth’s lamentation.
I hear the clear, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.
Refrain: No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I’m clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

How can I keep from singing! We come together for hope in midst of all that impedes, all that stands in our way, all earth’s lamentations. Hope empowers us to sing about love in the midst of earth’s lamentations.

Rubem Alves, a liberation theologian from Brazil, once observed that hope is hearing the melody of the future and that faith is to dance to that melody now.³ Or, as Robert Lowry said: “I hear the clear, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.” Hope is that sense that our imagination and dream is more real than reality. Hope is the suspicion that reality is far more complex than the brutal facts that oppress and limit us. Hope is the stirring within us that the frontiers of the possible are not limited by the present.

I don’t know what I would say to families in Dayton and El Paso today...but I do know that my discomfort and confusion is right. And I know what to do will fit love...in the proper ordering in the midst of hope. To say again, hope is hearing the melody of God’s future. And faith is dancing to the melody in the present. And the words to the melody are clear: love God, love neighbor...and (in distant third) love self.

³ See Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* (Orbis Books, 2011), page 124. Alves continues: Hope is the presentiment that the imagination is more real, and reality less real, than we had thought. It is the sensation that the last word does not belong to the brutality of facts with their oppression and repression. It is the suspicion that reality is far more complex than realism would have us believe, that the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the present, and that miraculously and surprisingly, life is readying the creative event that will open the way to freedom and resurrection.