

Text: Mark 12: 28-34  
Title: Standing on One Foot  
Date: 11.01.09  
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There are 613 commandments in the Torah ~ the first five books of the Bible. Of those 613 commandments 365 are commandments of prohibition ~ don't do this, and 248 are commandments of action ~ do this. As a way of remembering those commandments the prayer shawls donned by Orthodox Jews every morning and evening have 613 knots in the fringes.

But, even those who were wrapped in the commandments of God had a hard time keeping track of all those requirements and restrictions, so the question of their relative weight was a common currency.

What is the heaviest or the lightest commandment?  
What falls to the bottom as the most substantial?  
What rises to the top as the frothiest?  
Of the 613 commandments which is the greatest?

The question posed to Jesus in this morning's text was a common one. It was a way to get at the essence of a rabbi. It was a favorite question to get at the flavor of teacher's teaching. For example, in first century Jewish Talmudic literature there is a story told of a Gentile who wanted to learn the Torah. He first went to Rabbi Shammai with his question but Shammai chased him away with a stick because he thought the man was making a mockery of the Torah.

We pick up the story as he comes to Rabbi Hillel:

*All out of breath, he came to Hillel's home. Hillel thought the man had come for something very important. So Hillel said: "What is the matter, my good man?"*

*And the heathen answered: "Teach me the Torah while I stand on one foot."*

*Of course Hillel, too, saw that the heathen was scoffing, but calmly and patiently he said:*

*"You want to learn a great deal quickly, don't you? Very well, I shall teach you the Torah while you stand on one foot. This is our Holy Torah: 'What is hateful to you, do not do unto others.'"*

*The heathen forgot that he had come only to jeer. "Does it mean that the heathens and the Jews and all of us are brothers? Does it mean that we must be kind to one another like brothers?" asked the heathen, wonderingly.*

*"That's it, my son. That's the meaning of the whole Torah. All the rest is only commentary ~ an explanation of that. Go, go, my son. Go and study it," said Hillel kindly.*

*"When may I come for another lesson?" asked the heathen humbly.*

There you have it! Rabbi Hillel captures the essence of the Torah while a Gentile is standing on one foot. He whittles 613 commandments down to one.

It is in that same spirit that a scribe approaches Jesus.

Jesus had just arrived in Jerusalem and was creating quite a stir. He had been welcomed as a king ~ riding on a donkey. He had started a wild rumpus in the temple ~ turning over tables and driving out the money changers and the dove dealers. The chief priests and elders were all aflutter about authority, and place, and purpose ~ so like waves piling up on a beach, they pose to Jesus a series of pointed and difficult questions:

*Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?*

*A women who is widowed seven times with no children... At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?*

Jesus handles all of their questions with wisdom, grace, and a certain divine panache. So, one scribe cuts to the chase and asks Jesus about the greatest commandment. In Mark's account it doesn't appear like a trick. The scribe simply wants to get at the essence of Jesus.

You know the answer. Jesus reaches back to the core of Hebrew scripture and offers a portion of the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:

*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...*

Jesus answers with part of a prayer that every Jew would recite wrapped in a prayer shawl. Then for good measure ~ as you love God you would love that which bears the image of God ~ he tacks on a text from Leviticus 19.

And, in the middle of the temple, in the center of the sacrificial system, the scribe affirms that love of God and love of neighbor is more important than sacrifice. The Torah on one foot.

Now, the difficulty is that while we may be standing on one foot ~ it takes two feet to walk. The difficulty is the commentary.

How then do I love God and neighbor?

What does love look like?

What are the practical implications ~ the daily commandments of love?

How do I love God with my mind?

Who is my neighbor?

How do I keep the commandments from being cold-rigid-legalism and love from being amorphous-airy-fairy-fluff with no traction in real life?

How do I live love?

Twentieth century, Swiss Reformed theologian, Karl Barth writes:

*Loves is the essence of Christian living. It is also its “conditio sine qua non” in every conceivable connection. Wherever the Christian life in commission or omission is good before God, the good thing about it is love.*

As love is the essence ~ how then do I love God and neighbor? Lets come at it this way:

31 years ago at its annual governance gathering the Christian Reformed Church of North America stated that, “the alleviation of hunger at home and abroad is an integral part of Christian responsibility.” This morning we “celebrate” the 30th World Hunger Sunday. It is one way in which the CRC has tried to remember the needs of people around the world and mobilize resources for action. And, 30 years later the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee is at work in over 30 countries impacting millions of lives. It is a remarkable expression of loving God and loving neighbor. Thanks be to God!

But, 30 years later, we also live in a wired global village where the flood of images and information is often overwhelming and numbing.

According to a mid-October report by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization there are now more hungry people in the world than ever before. They estimate that better than 1 billion people are undernourished ~ that is one sixth of the world’s population. 10.5 million children under the age of five die each year in developing countries. Malnutrition and hunger related diseases cause 60% of those deaths. UNICEF estimates one child dies every six seconds because of hunger related causes...

*I don’t even know how to make sense of that. I hardly seems possible, hardly seems true....*

Or closer to home, in the midst of a substantial and sustained budget crisis Illinois state government cut the funding that supported the “Drop-in Center” at Roseland Christian Ministries. So now, rather than providing two meals a day five days a week for sixty to ninety homeless and unemployed men, they now provide one meal a day ~ three days a week for those men.....

It is relatively easy to pile on bad news. Without wrestling with the high cost of cheap calories, the epidemic of obesity, the corrupt global systems of price fixing and subsidies, the toxic toll of industrial sized farms, the energy expended in moving food all over the world, the depletion of fish stock and rain forest, the... the.. The issues are complex and beyond simple sermonizing, or blind faith in the free market, or naïve hope in political progress.

And, so it is relatively easy to stand on one foot and feel overwhelmed and impotent and stuck in powerful overlapping systems in which we can’t effect meaningful change, or kindle hope, or know best by omission or commission how to love God and neighbor.

How then do we live in a way in which the kingdom is near?

Sara Miles is a loud-leftist-lesbian, who walked into an Episcopal church, received communion, and found herself started on a life changing journey. She was transformed in the act of communion, kept coming back, listening, looking, learning, and eventually started a kitchen out of that Episcopalian church that feeds hundreds of the hungry every day. She writes:

*...at the heart of Christianity is a power that continues to speak and transform us. As I found to my surprise and alarm, it could speak even to me: not in the sappy, Jesus-and-cookies tone of mild-mannered liberal Christianity, or the blustering, blaming hellfire of the religious right. What I heard and continue to hear is a voice that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely; that upsets the establishment and makes a joke of certainty. It proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures will be made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and the unworthy, the screwed-up and the pious, and then commands everyone to do the same. It doesn't promise to solve or erase suffering but to transform it, pledging that by loving one another, even through pain, we will find more life....*

Dear friends, may we continually be changed by communion. Even as we are fed, may we be cracked open to look, and listen, and learn, and love. May we find faithful and freeing ways to give and participate with partners like Christian Reformed World Relief Committee and Roseland Christian Ministries. May we be so transformed that to our surprise and alarm we find new ways love God and neighbor. May we follow Jesus who embodied the love of God and love of neighbor ~ and calls us to the same ~ until that great and glorious day when all of God's people will gather at a feast and no one will be sent away hungry.

Amen.