

LIVE SHEMAfully!
Sermon, November 4, 2018
Text: Mark 12:28-34

"Mayday Mayday Mayday!" As you no doubt know, Mayday is an emergency word used internationally as a distress signal; the call is always given three times in a row to avoid any potential misunderstanding and/or uncertainty as to the reality of the emergency. What you may not know is that the word derives from the French "m'aider," meaning "help me" (*the pronunciation of the French term is just about homonymous with the English "May Day."*) The distress signal originated in 1923 with Frederick Mockford, a senior radio officer at Croydon Airport in London; Mockford was asked to think of a word that would indicate distress and would easily be understood by all pilots and ground staff in an emergency. Since much of the traffic at the time was between Croydon and Le Bourget Airport seven miles north of Paris (*fyi, the landing site of Charles Limbergh after his pioneering trans-Atlantic flight in 1927*), he proposed the word "Mayday" from the French "m'aider." The United States Coast Guard definition of a Mayday situation is "A vessel or aircraft is in grave and imminent danger of going down and requires immediate assistance." And the "Mayday" call is only to be used when all else fails.

Over the course of my years in ministry I've met many who have sort of a Mayday faith (*nobody here, of course*) ... a "faith" that's only to be used when all else fails, when everything is coming unglued! They seem never to give God any consideration in their lives until they are going down, until they get into trouble, and then call on Him as a last resort when all their other efforts have failed. Well, don't have a *mayday* faith, have a *payday* faith ... a faith that seeks every moment to pay our debt of love and gratitude to God.

Jesus talks about such a "Payday" type of faith in our Gospel reading. He is in Jerusalem, teaching at the Temple, and has had one testy encounter after another with the religious leadership. As today's reading from Mark opens, a scribe who has been listening in on all this seems quite taken with Jesus and His responses. So the scribe joins the conversation with a question of his own: "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" It wasn't at all unusual to ask such a question, people often asked their rabbis to summarize their thoughts, just as people today like to have their pastors summarize their thoughts a bit better! I've mentioned this in years past when we've looked at this passage, but there is a story told about the legendary first century Rabbi Hillel who was challenged by a Gentile to teach him the whole Torah ... while he (*the Gentile*) stood on one foot. In other words, "Can you teach me the whole point, the nugget, the central meaning of the Torah before I lose my balance standing here on one foot? Precisely and concisely, what is your religion about?" Without missing a beat, Rabbi Hillel responded, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary; therefore, go and learn it." Good summary!

In like manner, Rabbi Jesus provides a similar summary, but with a crucial addition. The first part of Jesus "summary" (*left out of Rabbi Hillel's*) was what every Jew of His day knew to be the most important command; one that dates back to Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "Shema Yisra'el, Adonai elohenu, Adonai echad." "Hear O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one ... and you shall love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all of your mind and with all of your strength." Jewish families for millennia recited these words in their homes every morning and night; it's called the "Shema." Then Jesus adds, "The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself." Most of us could stand on one foot while hearing that! I'm told President Lincoln attended Presbyterian churches in Springfield and in Washington but never joined any church. He explained why to then-Congressmen Henry Deming, "When any church will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification for membership the Savior's condensed statement of the substance of both law and Gospel, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and thy neighbor as thyself,' that church will I join with all my heart and all my soul." ¹

The word "shema" means not only "hear" as in "listen to," but "hear" as in *heed* or *obey*. But it's important to note the *dominant* word in the Shema; the dominant word is **love**. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and might." What does the command to love God require us to do? On the face of it, it doesn't require us to

¹ See <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/abraham-lincoln-on-membership-in-the-christian-church-in-his-remarks-to-congressman-henry-deming> Just for the record, Mr. President, and perhaps as a bit of a semantic distinction/clarification that only we clergy may care about, but there IS no altar in a Presbyterian church. From <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/dont-believe> - "An altar is a place where a sacrifice is offered and it is often viewed with special reverence. In the traditional Roman Catholic understanding the priest re-offers Christ on the altar as a sacrifice to God. Presbyterians believe the sacrifice of Christ has already been offered once for all, it needs no repetition, and the action of a priest cannot make it occur again. In the Presbyterian view, therefore, the Lord's Supper takes place at a table rather than an altar. Although many Communion tables are rather ornate, the table itself holds no particular significance or holiness; it is simply a supper table."

“do” anything! On the other hand, if taken seriously, well, it then affects *everything* we do. When we genuinely love someone, we want to do whatever we can to please the beloved. Our prevailing attitude is not that we HAVE to do things, but that we GET to do things ... because people who are in love, love to give joy to the beloved! Paraphrased, the Shema can be rendered, *“Love the Lord your God with everything you are and everything you have.”* To love God with all of one’s heart means to keep God at the center of our thinking, our dreaming, our desiring, our willing, our acting, our living and our giving so that our love for God shapes all we do, always looking for opportunities to pay (or, re-pay) our debt of love to Him.

By the way, the sermon title is not a typo. We want to live “shema-ful” lives ... not shameful lives. In fact, I’m convinced that’s how we best avoid living shameful lives, by living shemA-full lives that seek to heed, listen to, be attentive to and actively living for the God we love and the God who loves us each and every moment of our lives, and not just when we are in trouble! He deserves so much more than a “mayday” faith on our part. To love the Lord with all my strength means to love God with everything I have, all the time, because *God is good! (ALL THE TIME!) All the time! (GOD IS GOOD!) Amen? (I’M IN!)*²

I’m “in” with all my physical and material and mental and moral strength! And this includes, among other things, the generous, wise and compassionate use of all my resources in service of God. Again, people who are in love, love to give! As you know, next week we will bring our pledges forward to dedicate them during worship (*this is typically the time of the year I give what’s sometimes jokingly referred to as “The Sermon on the Amount”*). Giving is one of the authentic ways you and I worship God and demonstrate our love for Him. The use of our money is as important as our profession of faith, and in many ways, it may be a better indication of whom or what we truly love and trust in life. It’s been often said that one can learn quite a bit about a person’s spiritual sincerity by looking at his/her checkbook.

Years ago I came across a somewhat tongue-in cheek offertory prayer which says it all: *“Lord, no matter what we say or do, Here is what we think of You. Amen.”* It is my hope that each of us can genuinely pray such a prayer without shame, each and every time we give our offering AND, for that matter, each and every moment of our lives. ShemA-ful living and giving seeks to pray this prayer with integrity, even pride. The level of our giving is directly proportionate to the depth of our love of God. In our giving we acknowledge our debt of gratitude to God, we acknowledge our dependence on Him, we acknowledge He is the source of every good thing we have, we acknowledge we are stewards of what He has given us, and we acknowledge our trust in His good provision by giving generously off the top.

One more thing in closing: Living shemafully is about loving God, and it is also about loving our neighbor as well. Just in case you missed this, Tuesday is Election Day. Political and social and cultural engagement are all part of what it means to *“love your neighbor.”* Withdrawing from your neighbor, abandoning your neighbor, not being involved with your neighbor, are all inconsistent with the command to *love your neighbor*. As represented by these two flags in our sanctuary, we are citizens who owe allegiance to the sovereign God of Heaven and we are citizens who owe allegiance to the sovereign nation in which we live. Christianity is no enemy to civil government, but a friend to it. It is the Christ-given duty of citizens to render that which is due according to the laws of the country, as Jesus told us, *“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”* To be clear, though, where Caesar claims what is God’s, the claims of God have priority. Early Christians faced the wrath of Rome because they refused to worship the emperor ... an honor that belongs only to God ... and it was a refusal judged to be treasonous, punishable by death. They were good Roman citizens, up to a point ... but when “Caesar” claimed what was God’s, the faithful drew a line. We, too, are to obey laws, pay taxes, get involved and in all cases *“render unto Caesar”* as far as we are ethically able, because a stable society is beneficial to our neighbor and to us ... and, out of obedience to God, we are to love our neighbor. We must never neglect our civic responsibility to help others and to help set the moral tone of our culture in any way we can, and that includes casting our responsible vote this Tuesday. Prayerfully cast your vote for the candidates you believe will be best suited to not only assume office, but will best assume the responsibilities of that office for the wellbeing of our society. Cast your vote for the candidates you believe to be the most honorable, truthful and trustworthy.

And prayerfully cast your vote for the candidates who you believe will best uphold, encourage, respect ... and never impinge upon or threaten ... your freedom to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

² See the explanation of this little “litaney” at <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/when-amen-is-translated.pdf>