

There's a war of words going on out there. We are bombarded daily with words; everyone wants to give their opinion, even when it is personally mean, harsh and hateful. These highly charged words come at us from all sides and appear at times to be attacking us, not necessarily informing us about what's important in the world. Words are tossed out freely like candy at a parade: in emails, Facebook posts, twitter accounts, not-to-mention the newspapers, magazines, junk mail, billboards, banners, all appear overrun with words; some blunt, some provocative, some disturbing, some challenging, some philosophical and there are a few that are loving. Then we hear more on the radio, see more on TV where a host, doesn't matter the time of day, promotes additional negative thinking, defeatism, bickering and cynicism. It's enough to split our country.

I want a break from all these words, don't you? I want to watch the news, but they give a story in 20 or 30-second sound bites. These brief sound bites provide a small glimpse of what's happening. Let's face it, we live in a busy and chaotic world and maybe our way to keep a handle on it is to express what's on our minds! Let us turn now to our scripture and see what God's word has to say to us this morning.

Scripture Reading - Mark 12:28-34

Story - Henry David Thoreau, the author of *On Walden Pond*, tried to live a simpler life. Thoreau had an interesting reaction to the invention of the telegraph. As workmen were stringing wires through a meadow close to Walden, Thoreau went over to investigate and inquired as to what was happening. The men putting up the telegraph lines explained that there was this new invention. One of them said, “**Haven’t you heard?** With the telegraph, the people in Maine can communicate with people in Florida.”

Thoreau responded in a whimsical manner, asking, “But what if the people in Maine have nothing to say to the people in Florida?”

In our passage today, Jesus is responding to the scribe’s question about what is the first of all commandments. He’s saying, “**Haven’t you heard?**” and the scribe agrees with Jesus. He doesn’t debate him or try to trap him as other scribes, chief priests, and Pharisees have tried to do throughout the gospel of Mark. This is not your typical scribe. In NT times scribes were a class of professional lawyers. Lawyers and scribes are good at asking questions. They were teachers of the law and guardians of the law.

When Jews were living outside Israel the law became the center of all Jewish life. Many scribes were known as the ‘men of understanding,’ who helped form the canon of the Old Testament. Not only did they copy and edit

but they were the guardians of the textural purity of scripture. Scribes became the professional class of teachers and interpreters of the law.

Jesus' initial words are "**Hear, O Israel.**" The Hebrew word for *hear* is *Shemah*. Jesus is quoting Deut. 6:4-5, what's known as the *Shemah*. The placement of the word, *hear*, at the beginning of this passage is not insignificant. For Jews, the *Shemah* is said twice a day, emphasizing the time needed to break away from this busy world and just listen. Listen to God. Jesus tells us too, that the Lord is one; there is no other. Therefore, give all your love, all of your personhood, all of your understanding to God; and then you will be able to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

When Jesus reaches Jerusalem for his last Passover he is questioned repeatedly by scribes and Pharisees. Teachers like questions. At the start of a school year the teacher always tells the new class, "There is never a stupid question. I want you to ask questions whenever you have one." Jesus wouldn't have minded all the questions, except there's this growing opposition to Jesus, to his teachings and to his authority. The scribes and Pharisees want Jesus to say something wrong, so they can arrest him.

In our society we question everyone's intention. Some question why is there a caravan of immigrants coming from Central America to United States? Most of us question why did one man have to kill eleven

worshipping Jews in a synagogue? We question why our country is still splintered across racial lines, across socio-economic lines, across sexual identity lines, religious views, and political views. We seem unable to agree, only disagree.

Prior to this passage, Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees about paying taxes, questioned by Sadducees about resurrection of the dead. Jesus is questioned by the authorities about divorce. This scribe surprises us. He agrees with Jesus. He has become a new disciple. Jesus tells the scribe that he is not far from the kingdom of God. And the crowd around is so awestruck, so stunned by the teaching that no further questions are asked. Can you imagine no further questions asked of God? Where does our common dialogue start if we don't ask questions?

Jesus has given the scribe the foundation that guides us before all the rest of God's commands. When you love God with all your heart then you possess a disposition to every other duty God calls us to do. Love is the leading affection of the soul. Where there is no love, there is little good being done. Where there is no love, voices from the margins get drowned out. Where there is no love, we neither see nor hear those who hurt, suffer and go hungry. The *heart* is our center, our reservoir of love. It is a large muscle centered in our bodies. It pumps up to 144,000 X a day, every day of

our life. It's vigorous and compassionate. But it can also be judgmental, like that of the Pharisees and Scribes.

Hear O Israel, The Lord our God is one Lord. He is our God to whom we stand related. And to whom we owe our lives. There is one Lord, and he has the sole right to us and thus he should have the sole possession of us. The *soul* is our selfhood. It's all of you, inside and out, from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet and all that's within you. We might call it personality but it's much bigger than that. Personality is how others see you. Soul is how you see yourself.

When life intrudes into our relationship with God, we stop asking God questions because we're too distracted. If we're not asking questions, then we're not seeking answers, not using our minds. The *mind* filters our communications, the noise of culture, from the garbage in to the garbage out. The mind sorts out confusion and provides coherence. The mind can be analytical – understanding how we get one God in three persons. Or it can become cynical alongside a hard heart.

Finally, we get to *strength* – our vitality, our energy, our love of life. Ever notice how some of the more frail, elderly women and men in the church have the deepest inner strength? Seems incomprehensible. Their inner strength, their faith is tenacious. Their love of life is strong because

their love for God is one-dimensional. They give their all. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you'll find renewed strength.

The cultural war of words has taken us away from our relationship with God, neighbor and self. We lose sight of the greatest commandment. We stop asking God questions. We strive to find a way back to God, time to focus our thoughts and reflections upon God. We strive to replenish our reservoir of strength, love and compassion to step outside the chaos, disrespect, violence and cynicism towards God, neighbor and us, so we can serve God and others. Jesus went off alone to be with God and it wouldn't hurt us to do the same.

The more time and energy; heart, soul, mind and strength we give to God, the greater we will be affirmed by God as our own person, as one loved by God and wanted by God. When we enter into solitude to first meet our God and be with him alone, then it is here, according to Henri Nouwen, where Christ remodels us in his image and frees us from the compulsions of the world.

Friends, let us not be afraid to ask God our questions, to love God with all our being so that our love for neighbor and self is never in doubt. The power of one God and the change he can make in us never ceases to

amaze me. Give God all you've got, and you'll be amazed at all that God gives you in return. Amen.